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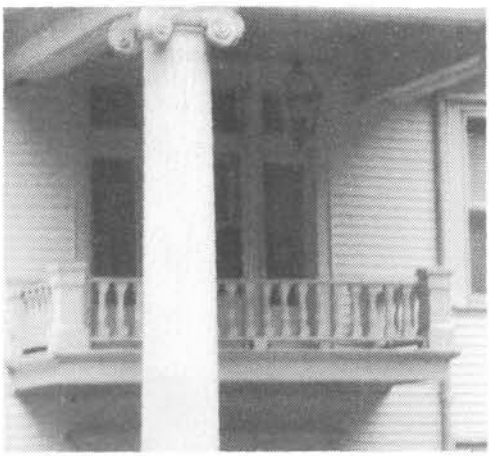
He found the style for plainest naked truth
And in some wisdom bore the end of youth.
—from "The History of a Traditionalist," by John Finlay

MIND AND BLOOD



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Comment:

The Life of Literature: Two Views

AFTER JAMES TATE'S *SELECTED POEMS* won the Pulitzer Prize last year, I felt obligated to read the honored book to see if I had been seriously undervaluing Tate's work. My own choice would probably have been Linda Gregg's *The Sacraments of Desire*, although the tonal riches of Mary Stewart Hammond's *Out of Canaan* provided an impressive counterweight to the rigorous austerities of Gregg. Jorie Graham's *Region of Unlikeness*, Andrew Hudgins' *The Never-Ending*, and Philip Levine's *What Work Is*, if somewhat more problematic than the volumes by Gregg and Hammond, also offered impressive writing the judges might have wished to recognize.

If reading Tate's selected poems only convinced me that Tate has thus far failed to fulfill such modest promise as his first two books showed in poems like "The Lost Pilot" and "Shadowboxing," it also suggested fundamental disagreements between Tate and Gregg far more important than who should have received a particular award. The best grounds for comparison are poems with similar subjects and titles, Tate's "The Life of Poetry" and Gregg's "The Life of Literature." Juxtaposing the poems reveals considerable differences in the ways the two writers look at the language, subject matter, and purpose of poetry.

First, here is Gregg's "The Life of Literature":

> Very early in the morning at the edge of the capital
> she is trying to get a ride. The huge machines
> go past noisily, covering her with dust. She worries
> about finding safe water or soda on the way.
> Finally a man reaches down and helps her climb up
> the wheel and over the side into the bed of the truck.
> A young girl shifts to make room, then settles her
> small brother's head in her lap. An old man turns
> the blade of his machete away from them. When she
> reaches Condega it is a quiet town. That night
> she sits on a piece of cardboard in the garden
> behind the house with the husband who used to live
> with her. They look at the moon and talk

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of poems in the book she lent him. The one
by Bāsho called *The Long Road into the Deep North.*

Here is James Tate's "The Life of Poetry":

This is how I bend over backward
to tie my shoes, I blink
across the night romancandle.
An omnibuzz, like typing on my tongue.
I want to sleep on these blank pages.

I shake this match and it won't go out,
a kamikaze blown in on a breeze.
I can't sleep brushing you.
Unbone my hand, early warning.
Unbone this cloud, possible showers.

Self is to be commended for correct
adult deportment at self's recent funeral
(except for ignoring the no-smoking sign).
Pass the sweet, Salty, it is morning:
the streets are tilted and rocky,

a newborn foundling has pinned its mother
with barely a whimper—Can't we discuss this
on the phone? A shot is fired next door,
miss the cat? Will those few
please sit up and speak to me;

otherwise I'm forced to conclude *keep walking,*
what's at the core of it, keep walking.

Though "The Life of Literature" is not the equal of the brilliant "My Father and God" or the other very best poems in *The Sacraments of Desire*—and fewer prepositional phrases would make "The Life of Literature" even more compressed—it fairly represents Gregg's characteristic style and accomplishment. Similarly, "The Life of Poetry" is above average for Tate's *Selected Poems* and representative of his usual style. Obviously, Tate liked it well enough to choose it for this volume.

At first glance, Tate's use of language appears to be richer and more ambitious than Gregg's. He uses several kinds of phrases which would not fit in her poem, not just "omnibuzz" but "correct adult deportment" and probably "kamikaze" as well. On the surface of Tate's poem, a great deal appears to be happening. In the first two stanzas, the poet seems to be giving us metaphors for poetry, such as "I shake this match and it won't go out, / a kamikaze blown in on a breeze," and perhaps also "This is how I bend over backward / to tie

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my shoes." However, by "Self is to be commended for correct / adult deportment at self's recent funeral" or "Pass the sweet, Salty," let alone "A shot is fired next door, / miss the cat?" that no longer seems to be the case. As usual with surrealism, structure is dissolved—is there any reason the poem is 27 rather than 17 or 37 lines long?—in favor of a concentration on the immediate linguistic moment. The surrealist poet must be from moment to moment more entertaining, in the most inclusive sense of that term, than the realist poet, who can use the expectations of structure to guide the reader's attention over a longer span. To admire Tate's work, one must find phrases like "Pass the sweet, Salty" or "a newborn foundling has pinned its mother" so adorably goofy that nothing else about the poem matters.

Not only does Tate's language not refer us consistently to a world outside the poem, it does not even establish a consistent internal world. One could call the poem hermetic except that hermeticism, as in some poems of Blake and Yeats, requires an internally coherent system. The imitation e. e. cummings of "romancandle" and "omnibuzz," uncharacteristic for Tate, is simply dropped after the first stanza. The interjection "Can't we discuss this on the phone?" is a recognizable Ashbery move, although Ashbery would almost surely use the phrase to greater purpose. Ashbery also likes to use prosy phrases like "correct adult deportment" for humorous effect, though again he would probably find a context which would point the phrase more. "Unbone my hand, early warning" might conceivably work in a high heroic diction (think of Hart Crane or Dylan Thomas) or a mock-heroic diction. No doubt Tate intends this mock heroically, but he never establishes a convention to mock. "I want to sleep on these blank pages" could come from almost any poem in the simple-language surrealist style of the 1970s—by James Wright, W. S. Merwin, Mark Strand, or their hordes of imitators.

The life of poetry, one gathers from reading this poem, is a matter of random linguistic effects strung together any which way. One can perhaps imagine a poem in which the various kinds of diction each function as part of an overall plan, or at least are meant to comment upon each other, but such is not the case here. The match that won't go out and the kamikaze are images which would seem to make serious romantic claims for poetry (the Ginsberg of "Howl" might have liked the kamikaze image) which this poem doesn't begin to fulfill.

Whereas Tate creates a surrealism of language, Gregg reveals surreal aspects of the world we live in. The well-educated woman (perhaps Gregg herself, perhaps not) takes a long journey next to a man with a machete in order to sit on a piece of cardboard in a garden and talk about Bāsho. That's surreal. On a first reading Gregg's language may seem to be doing less than Tate's language, but further readings reveal that it does a great deal more. Each word carries its weight—note the impact of "machete" and "cardboard," for instance.

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What Gregg can do with language that Tate cannot is create relationships. A young girl shifts to make room for the woman in the truck, "then settles her / small brother's head in her lap. An old man turns / the blade of his machete away from them." A small moment is economically captured in words. Or is it small? The old man's action seems easy and habitual as well as considerate. This is how members of his society must travel. Consider the implications of "she sits . . . with the husband who used to live / with her." The couple no longer lives together, yet the woman is willing to travel in a truck bed and worry about finding safe water or soda to get there. Do they talk to each other about poetry to avoid talking about their relationship, or has she made this trip to find someone with whom she can talk about poetry? The poem seems to include both possibilities. Notice that "the husband who used to live / with her" suggests economically that the husband is the one who has chosen the separation. The reference to sitting on a piece of cardboard tells us that there isn't a chair and that the ground is probably damp.

A further point of interest is Gregg's use of "the capital" rather than "Managua." According to the atlas, Condega is a town in Nicaragua. By suppressing the name of the capital or any other direct reference to the country, Gregg eliminates possible knee-jerk political responses, favorable or unfavorable, as well as a possibility for self-congratulation (e.g., "I was in Nicaragua, which makes me important"). The daily life of the country is what Gregg wants to describe, so that is where she places her emphasis.

Despite Tate's talk of "self's recent funeral," one feels that the account of self's demise has been greatly exaggerated. When the words of a poem do not refer to an external world or even coherently to other words in the poem, what is left except narcissism? Tate's poem begins in solipsism and ends in triviality. Gregg's 15 lines, on the other hand, suggest relationships between cultures as well as between characters. In effect, Gregg could feed a family of six for a year on what Tate spends for souvenir T-shirts and ashtrays. The life of literature, we may gather from Gregg's poem, is of the utmost seriousness; related to daily life in its multifarious aspects; concerned with precise and accurate observation; concerned with the interrelations of cultures and societies, including the preservation of distant cultures; concerned with the selection and arrangement of words to make the maximum intellectual and emotional impact; worth a hard journey to an estranged spouse to talk about poetry; implicitly, worth poverty.

Tate and Gregg could scarcely disagree more about what poetry is and how poets ought to write. The freedom Tate implicitly claims for himself, the freedom to write down whatever comes into his head next, is a freedom Gregg does not desire. Tate's conclusion "*keep walking, / what's at the core of it, keep walking*" is a counsel of despair. Nothing is at the core of this poem, except perhaps the desire to have

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written a poem, so that the poet can only "keep walking"—either walk away from the scene of the crime or keep writing more of the same. I would suggest that "The Life of Poetry" unwittingly indicates the bankruptcy of American surrealism. Readers must decide for themselves whether Gregg or Tate offers the more convincing view of the literary work and the life which animates it.

DAVID DOOLEY

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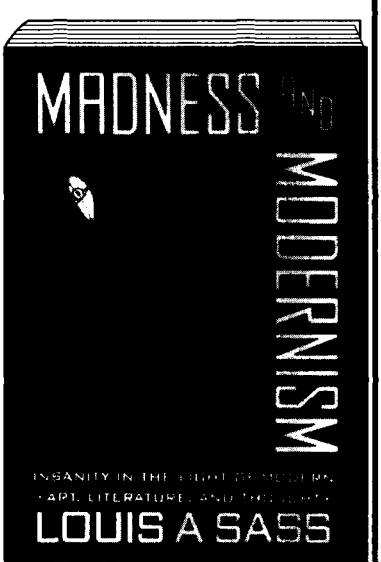

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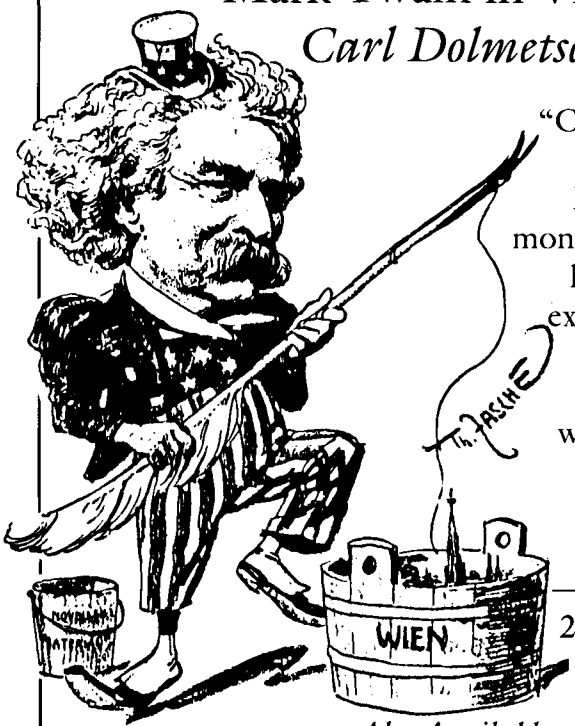

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CARL PFLUGER

Digging up the Dead: Consecration, Desecration, and Some Questions about Archeology

I

I grew up in a New England town of which I have sometimes said, not entirely facetiously, that the best, the liveliest place in it, is the cemetery. I do not say this in disparagement of the presently living inhabitants of my hometown—who are, after all, no worse than ordinary—but merely in recognition that it is the tangible remains of some three and a half centuries of continuing historical existence that above all gives a certain sense of human depth to this one particular, otherwise not especially remarkable patch of the globe. And this is a sense shared, more or less, by all the citizens, regardless of their origins—regardless of their blood relationship to the bodies buried beneath those stones. Certainly the majority of them, like myself, do not stem from families rooted here from the beginning, but some kind of corporate identity is nonetheless open to all; and the cemetery, with its visible and palpable artifacts from times past, is the most generally accessible approach to that identity: to that community spread so much more extensively—and more impartially—through time than through space.

The headstones here are also, like all really old monuments, of considerable aesthetic and historical interest. Death's-head, cherub, urn-and-willow: one may trace some of the softening of Puritan theology over the eighteenth century in the succession of these designs carved on the arches of the stones. And the epitaphs—often enough mere banal doggerel—occasionally show the quaint charm that comes of a colonial tradition in which it is not always easy (and perhaps not desirable) to separate "folk" from "learned" elements. Here is my favorite among these, in memory of a sea captain who died in 1786:

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Tho Boreas' Blaſts & Neptune's Waves
Have toſſ'd me to and fro
In ſpite of Death by God's Decree
I harbour here below

Where I do now at anchor ride,
With many of our Fleet
Yet once again I muſt make Sail
Our adm'ral Christ, to meet.

But of course that is exceptional, one of the rare gems of this collection: an idiosyncratically sparkling glimpse of personality catching the eye across the gulf of centuries, one of the special treats which a tourist of graveyards may occasionally expect to reward his peregrinations. The majority of these inscriptions are more routine, though poignant enough: most commonly variations on that Latin tag already old when this churchyard was new: *Sum quod eris*, I am what you will be. It is the universal cry of the dead to the living, their last affirmation of a continuing communion with us.

I have always enjoyed cemeteries; but I began thinking more intensively, and more publicly, about this peculiar devotion of mine when I heard about the campaigns of some Indian tribes to reclaim the remains of their ancestors: remains which had been, over the past couple of centuries, *lifted* by archeologists (or in some cases by "mere" grave robbers—though from some points of view the distinction between these two callings has not always been entirely clear) and redeposited in various museums around the United States. The Indians in this argument are not very happy about the treatment of their ancestral remains by "white" archeologists; and this is of course only a part of their amply justified complaint against the treatment of Indians by white people generally. Responding to this protest, the archeological profession has invoked the universal values of science, and all the particular benefits (medical, forensic, etc.) which can be derived from science. There seems to be a conflict of values here: perhaps even of sacred values, given the quasi-sacred status which science itself has acquired in our time. But it is also, in an obvious sense, a conflict about power and possession. As

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long as Native Americans remain a dispossessed people, they can scarcely be expected to feel comfortable with having their people's bones pawed over by representatives of a system they do not control. And this is a conflict which has arisen elsewhere as well: everywhere, in fact, where a people's traditional sense of themselves, their identity, and their place on "their own" land has collided with the enterprise of archeology—an enterprise which, we should do well to remember, was launched in large part by that quintessentially nineteenth-century hybrid of capitalist and visionary, Heinrich Schliemann.

In the Middle East, where more layers of history lie impacted upon one another than anywhere else on earth, this conflict has been far more intense (and more convoluted) than in our own country. Palestinians, long before the *intifada*, staged protests against Israeli digs; Syrian authorities were obviously discomforted by the discovery of the lost city of Ebla in the late 1970s, because some of the names unearthed there seemed to confirm the patriarchal narratives of the Old Testament, and therefore to validate Zionist claims to the land of Israel; and a few years ago, when a tomb in Jerusalem produced the body of a man who had been crucified, scholars and the media fell over themselves reassuring us that *of course* there was no reason to suppose that this was the body of . . . well, you know who. And so it has gone ever since Schliemann's epic squabbles with the Ottoman authorities.

Again, some of this is "merely" political: Palestinians, for example, will find it obviously opportune to protest almost anything done by Israeli agencies. But a deeper ambiguity shows itself here, too. Islamic societies have themselves been ambivalent about the pre-Islamic past of their own countries: the godless arrogance of Chosroes, or of the Pharaohs, is a commonplace of Muslim oratory; and the general tenor of Muslim regard for the relics of those "Days of Ignorance" was set by the Caliph al-Mamun—generally one of the more enlightened of early Muslim rulers—who in the ninth century bored a tunnel into the Great Pyramid in a futile effort to lay his hands on Khufu's treasure. But then, Muslims stand in relation to the really ancient remains of their own region rather as we post-Columbian immigrant Americans do to the remains of the Amerinds: the Arabs too are relative newcomers, invaders whose presence in most of the Middle East antedates the Euro-African settlement of

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the Americas by less than a thousand years—and what is that, *sub specie aeternitatis*? Such obvious historical discontinuities, such breaks in the natural growth of countries and communities, might make it at least superficially easier to take a "cool, detached, objective" attitude toward the remains of the dead, to treat them as objects of mere scientific or aesthetic interest—but the full story is still more complex and ambiguous than that.

Here, as often, the Jews may provide a useful illustration, in their frequent rôle as an "exceptional" people whose uniqueness, under closer examination, turns out to be less than is easily assumed. In contrast to their Arab neighbors, Israelis have pursued archeology with a passion that has seemed at times to elevate it to the status of a second national religion. It is easy enough to see why, at least up to a point. By digging deeply enough, they may produce remains of their own ancestors: tangible evidence of their claims to the land. And this has always been one of the chief social functions of burial grounds, of the ceremonial deposition of one's dead. Often, the archeological enterprise has come as a violation of this pact between the living and the dead; but in Israel it has at least as often served as a reaffirmation of it, asserting with all the force of a scientific demonstration the continuity of the Jews who returned under the Zionist dispensation with those who had lived in these places more than two thousand years ago. The Arabs, then, may well have reason (even aside from the usual resentments of alien scrutiny: Euro-centric, "Orientalist" and all that) to fear the subversive potential of this intrusive digging: it threatens to expose the comparative recentness of their tenure of the land, as it brings to light something of the antiquity of the Jews.

Yet even this contrast is not entirely simple. Muslim regimes have also deployed archeology as a political weapon, and even on behalf of the pre-Islamic cultures of their own nations. The late Shah's attempt to identify himself with the Achaemenid dynasty (most flamboyantly displayed in his theatrical reconstruction of Persepolis) may have ended with his reign, but it would be surprising if nothing like it ever reappears in Iran; and Saddam Hussein's bizarre and vulgar cult of Nebuchadnezzar is only one more case in point. Meanwhile, Israel itself has not been free of all contradictions on this issue either. Some of the loudest protests against Israeli digs have come from the

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most Orthodox among the Jews themselves: zealous partisans of a piety that revolts against the "sacrilegious" operations of Israel's own more or less secularized archeological savants. That cool disinterment of the dead, that cold-blooded handling of human bodies which archeology requires (as does surgery, for that matter, and some other professional services to humanity) does indeed serve some kind of higher—or at least broader—sense of sacred values; but it also demands a certain distancing from the more usual feelings of particular human communities—from the general sense, e.g., that the dead should be "left in peace."

II

That such feelings are universally human is shown by some of the very archeological investigations which, at one level, inflict such an outrage upon them. They seem, moreover, to have existed even before our species reached its present form: Neanderthal skeletons have been found carefully laid out and accompanied by floral offerings. A modern theory of human origins holds that the Neanderthals, because of certain limitations of their laryngeal architecture, were incapable of spoken language as we know it, and therefore would hardly qualify as fully human according to our customary terms; yet they apparently shared with us this concern for the dead which, perhaps more than any other single trait, sets us apart, as humans, from the other animals. It seems fitting, therefore, that the first recorded conflict between traditional piety and the modern disciplines of archeology should have occurred over their bones. In 1852, near Aurignac in southern France, the remains of at least seventeen ancient skeletons were accidentally discovered in a cave. The mayor promptly ordered their reburial in the parish churchyard; and a few years later, when Edouard Lartet, a pioneer in the emerging study of early man, came looking for them, he got no cooperation from the church custodians in his attempt to exhume them for his scientific studies: they resisted telling him the location of these new/old graves.

We may smile a little at the naïveté of the provincial functionaries who arranged these Christian obsequies for people

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whose religion, if any, would have been incomprehensibly alien to their own Catholic Christianity; whose language (again, if any!) remains utterly unknowable to us; whose only bond indeed to those who reburied them was that they were also human, and that they had lived in this same corner of what we now call France. But we must also accord them a measure of respect. A certain awe of the dead—it may take the form of reverence (as in the element of ancestor-worship which remains a component of all our religions) or of mere vulgar terror (as in the commonest of ghost stories)—has undeniably strong and deep roots in our human natures. And one of the strongest of these roots is the sense of shared place, with its multifarious ideas of belonging, of community, and of title to the land: the sense that where "my" dead are, there is my home, my hearth, my earth. This sentiment was already ancient in the time of Abraham, who (according to Genesis 23:17–19) purchased the sepulchral cave of Mamre for his kin—but it still has force to move us today. I felt it myself when with my own hands I poured my mother's ashes over the roots of her favorite beech tree, on a hillside which I can still see from the window as I write; and it can even surface, freshly and unexpectedly, in the public discourse of our modern, enlightened and secularized societies—as it has, for example, in the recent history of Canada and Québec.

The 1980 referendum campaign on Québec independence took on some disturbingly racist overtones when the late Québec Premier René Lévesque (in an irritable moment, unworthy, I believe, of his own best feelings) taunted Canada's Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau with his "English" middle name. Responding in an uncharacteristically extemporaneous speech, which is widely credited with turning the tide of the campaign, Trudeau called to witness the cemeteries where that name of his mother's family may be read on two centuries of tombstones planted on Québec soil. Trudeau has sometimes been criticized (especially by English Canadians) for being "too rational, too intellectual"—all those things that have been part of the stereotype of French character since—well, since Descartes—but here, certainly, he struck the right emotional chord. In countering an irrational prejudice, volumes of reasoned argument may be far less effective than the heartfelt cry of another, more generous,

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irrational feeling: in this case, that sense of a common inheritance evoked by the solemn deposition of one's dead.

III

Into the traditional ambience of awe, reverence, or at least of decent respect—with its correlative abhorrence of grave robbers and all such disturbers of the peace of the dead—the archeologist intrudes as the ultimate defiler, a systematic and professionally blasphemous predator—or worse, as a parasite, a scavenger, a ghoul—one who makes his living off the dead, heartlessly picking over those sacred relics for his own profane and alien purposes. Certainly Schliemann's career does nothing to dispel this impression. Alternately tricking or browbeating the Greek and Turkish authorities as the opportunity arose, he operated with the transcendent willfulness of an authentic robber baron—en epithet equally appropriate, after all, to a nineteenth-century entrepreneur (which he was for most of his life) and to those Homeric heroes who were his literary and spiritual inspiration.

But then, should we not really ask: how peculiar was this predatory/parasitic attitude to Schliemann, or to the whole archeological enterprise of which he is himself the founding hero, if not exactly the patron saint? From the broadest of biocentric perspectives, are not all of us pillagers and parasites of the dead? We all live, more than we generally care to acknowledge, at the expense of those who have gone before us; we inhabit houses which were built by them, and enjoy the fruits of all their labors: material, political, social and cultural. Speaking most broadly, human beings are like all other species: we live on the dead and disintegrating bodies of other organisms, all ultimately growing out of that mold, that soil, into which we all again return. Ashes to ashes, earth to earth; humus to human (the phonological likeness here is not accidental) and back again: all who live, live by feeding on the remains (what a *pregnant* word!) of the dead; and this has been so ever since our kind of oxygen-breathing life began to thrive on the wastes of the largely self-exterminated anaerobic bacteria which were the first generation of life on this planet.

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In such a perspective, our relations with the dead do not look all that different from our relations with the living: both are equally permeated with ambiguities and uncertainties, equally "tainted," or enriched, with a fertile mixture of actions, gestures and motives. And so, equally ancient and primitive as that sense of sacred separation from and sequestering of the dead, is a contrary impulse, its coeval polar opposite, which we find equally evident in the funeral rites of all peoples: the desire to bridge the gulf between them and us, to welcome the dead (and to be welcomed by them) into some kind of continuing communal and commensal relationship. What else is the point of all those epitaphs in which the dead fictively speak to the living? Such tombstones are like the time capsules which came into vogue a few decades ago; and the more imposing and elaborately planned a burial is, the more it partakes of this image: a message in a bottle dropped into the ocean of time, hoping to encounter a reader somewhere among the endless waves of humanity to come. . . . But the messages encoded in these capsules are various, and even more varied are the rites with which men have launched them into that elemental abyss.

In what is perhaps the earliest literary demonstration of cultural relativism germane to this topic, Herodotus tells us (III, 38) that King Darius of Persia once brought together some visitors from the most distant frontiers of his empire, Greeks and Indians. What price, Darius asked the Greeks (whom the Persians tended to regard as willing to do anything for money) would you demand for eating the bodies of your fathers? The Greeks, in a paroxysm of righteous indignation, responded that nothing could induce them to commit such an outrage, and they begged the King not even to mention such an abomination again. Darius then confronted them with some of his Indian subjects who (so the story goes) did in fact eat their fathers' bodies as part of their usual obsequies—and who were equally horrified and revolted when they were told about the Greek usage of cremation—thus confirming, according to Herodotus, the word of Pindar that "custom is king of all." ("Custom" here translates the Greek *νόμος* [*nomos*] which also has the meanings of "law" and "convention": everything human beings do which is somehow "contrary to nature.")

Literally and physically eating the dead may be rare among

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actual human communities; but the shock which these Herodotean Indians offer to our sensibilities arises mostly from their confronting us with the starkest possible presentation of one of the poles between which all our rites concerning the dead tend to divide themselves. Such anthropophagy is the "fast forward" setting of the recycling mode: it brings the atoms of the dead back into circulation with a minimum of intermediation. (Cremation does this too, rather more fastidiously.) Against this we may set all those modes of containment and encapsulation—burial (especially in sealed coffins), entombment, embalming, etc.—which seek to preserve the bodies of the dead for as long as possible, pretending to fortify them against the inevitable processes of decay, dissolution, and eventual reincorporation into other forms of life. These variations may reflect divergent theories of personal immortality—resurrection vs. reincarnation, for example—or they may express different degrees of value assigned to the individual personality per se. Monumental tombs are, if nothing else, forceful assertions of the personalities of their rich and powerful owners, demanding a recognition from posterity comparable to the deference they had received in life from their contemporaries. They want their names to be remembered, and the proclamations of their exalted selves to be read, forever after. But once the continuity is broken—tongues forgotten, gods abandoned—who will evermore remember those individuals, who will read their lives, if not those cool, detached and desecrating archeologists, who have labored so assiduously at just this task of "reading" the remains of the ancient dead?

And so it is at least an entertainable notion that the dead whose remains are so cavalierly handled by the archeological profession would not in fact have been entirely displeased by their treatment. Certainly the Pharaohs did not want their treasuries rifled by vulgar tomb robbers (as most of them in fact were, already before the beginning of the Christian Era)—but can we be so certain that their vanity would not have been gratified by the prospect of having their splendors displayed for the admiration of millions on our public television specials or in our arty coffee-table books? I think not. The homage paid to these remains, even (or especially?) by those of us moderns whose nominal motives are "merely" scientific or aesthetic is

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hardly less flattering than what they received from their own peoples. More than three thousand years after his death Tut-ankh-Amen, in life one of the most insignificant of the Pharaohs, has become (thanks to the latter-day "tomb robbery" of Carter and Carnarvon) the object of a cult at once commercial, academic, and popular; a cult in almost the literal sense of the word, more genuinely devoted to the perpetuation of his name than that offered in his own time by the nominally faithful servitors of his own court. The long lines of visitors (pilgrims, one is tempted to call them) who came so eagerly to see his special exhibit when it toured the world some years ago at least manifested a more personal interest in this one rather pathetic royal individual than did his immediate successors who, embroiled in their own politics, gave him as cursory an entombment as Egyptian conventions would allow—and who not long afterward covered his sepulchre with rubble, inadvertently preserving it (uniquely among Pharaonic tombs) for the curious pillagers of our time.

We may contrast this, amusingly and instructively, with the treatment accorded the body of Lenin—who, unlike Tut, was one of the authentically powerful personalities of his own day. Lewis Mumford compared the mummification of Communist founder-heroes to those of the "Pyramid Age"—but the differences are striking and ironic. The Pharaohs were secreted away, immured against light and the inspection of the masses; whereas Lenin and his epigoni were placed immediately in glass cases, as if to short-circuit (in the familiar Marxist mode) the long processes of history, seeking to achieve instantly that status of museum-piece icons for which Tut, and Schliemann's "Agamemnon," had to wait at least an intervening age. But the sullenly shuffling subjects who, in the heyday of Communist power, trooped cowed and obedient past the artfully-preserved bodies of their lately-deceased masters seem an awkward counterfeit of the crowds who came of their own free will to view the remains of those modernly excavated ancient rulers. And now that Lenin's name is recalled with execration in his own country, and the brief saeculum of Communism seems to be definitely on the cusp of passing away—we wait impatiently for the demise of Deng, Kim and Castro—what future, "radiant" or otherwise, awaits these precocious mummies? Will they now be

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consigned to their vaunted ash-heap, while the world, at the turn of a new historical cycle, gazes reverently at the relics of the "feudal" and "servile" past?

IV

From the very beginning of philosophical thought there has been a persistent strain of radical criticism that revolts against all the fuss which people have made over the dead, insisting that there is no reason why human remains should not be disposed of like any other worn-out old trash. "Corpses are more fit to be thrown out than dung," said Heraclitus, early in the fifth century B.C.—which, considering the rôle of manure in recycling the nutrients of any living community, perhaps concedes more than the misanthropic old sophist intended. "Let the dead bury the dead," said another, presently more famous, ancient authority—which did not prevent his name from being invoked by nearly two millennia of posterity in obsequies as solemn and elaborate as any tradition has ever seen.

The Cynic/Stoic tradition—which claimed Heraclitus as one of its precursors, and made a great point of "living according to Nature"—was especially vociferous on this issue. Concerning Diogenes the proto-Cynic (the one who lived in a tub, carried a lantern "looking for an honest man" and told Alexander the Great to move his shadow), there are at least three accounts of what he wanted done with his own body. Prop it up as a scarecrow, he said; or else throw it into the river as fish-food—"that he might be useful to his brethren," as his biographer Laertius puts it, in what to modern ears might sound like an early statement of Deep Ecological conscience. But who could be expected to do anything at all with his body, he was asked, since he lived such a solitary life, without even the few slaves deemed necessary for a respectable Greek existence? "Whoever wants the house," he replied—by that time, apparently, having traded up from his tub.

"Whoever wants the house"—now *that* is both Cynic and cynical; but it does highlight unflinchingly one part anyway of our normal relations with the dead. At least this anecdote helps us see how the name of the most austerely moralizing school of

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ancient philosophy could have become selectively narrowed down to its modern sense of exposing the cheapest material motives to all our actions. Diogenes, like most representatives of his school, invoked the authority of "Nature" to disparage the "conventions" of human society—but his was a narrowly dogmatic idea of nature, conceived from a relentlessly individualist perspective. Like Darius in the story of Herodotus, he noticed the infinite variability of human customs; and from this he concluded that none of them could qualify as "natural" according to his crudely scientific paradigm. Diogenes called his vehement denial of convention "cosmopolitan," a word he seems to have invented; but this cut-rate cosmopolitanism overlooks a more profound insight, one confirmed by all anthropology—including anthropology's dirty-handed operational arm, archeology—that it is a truly universal feature of human societies to observe some laws, some conventions: about, among other things, the ceremonial treatment of the dead. No particular custom may be any more natural than another; but from the Neanderthal burials in the Shanidar cave to, say, the funerals which became such potent rallying-points in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the ritualized deposition of the dead has continued to evoke some of the strongest feelings in our human natures.

Yes, what we do with corpses (and even more, the spirit in which we do it) really does matter; the will of the dead and the spirit of the living should here find some common ground of meeting and understanding. My mother's ashes leaching every year into the soil of her own hillside, and the ashes of those murdered at Auschwitz (processed by the German chemical industry into commercially usable fertilizer) were alike recycled in a manner which from some scientific perspective might seem to be equivalent; but no one in his right mind could fail to see the difference: a difference made by the sense of shared remembrance, of community; a sense conspicuously absent from the hypertrophied individualism of Diogenes and his imitators. Compared with such "philosophical" antinomianism, archeology (together with all its ancillary sciences) is as profound an act of reverence, of piety, as any which human beings have ever offered. For the archeologist, no matter how "callously" he may handle the remains of the dead—bringing them up from their graves,

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subjecting them to the most intrusive physical and chemical analyses—is above all concerned with understanding them: with reading them, with finding a meaning to their lives. And in this he is inviting them into the broadest, the most inclusive, community of which we (at least in our present state of development) are capable. Ultimately, he redeposits them in museums; but a museum (originally a temple of the Muses) may well be the most authentic shrine which has yet been produced by our own culture: relative, time-bound, and ethnically conditioned, no doubt; but no less natural for all that: our own particular variation among all the others that have been played (and will continue to be played) on the universal human themes of life and death.

It seems impossible to go very far along these lines of reflection without running into that (modernly not very fashionable) dualism of body and soul, flesh and spirit. In all funeral rites of which I have any knowledge, the flesh is given over, sooner or later, to the eternal, elemental processes of the world—"recycling" is only the current bio-technical jargon for this—but something else of the dead remains among the living, something for which different people have found different words: spirit, soul, *ba*, *ka*, *atman*, *nous* or "active intellect"; for which I at this moment can find no better word than *memory*. There is, perhaps, some confusion here in our usual terminology. When we speak of the "remains" of the dead, we most often refer to those inert physical components—flesh, bones or ashes—which are the visible objects of our attentions. But of course those are the very things which, according to most of our sacred taboos, are supposed to be sequestered away from the living. They generally do not remain with us, but apart from us. What does remain with us is memory. The dead continue to have some sort of existence among us only insofar as they continue to resonate in the lives of their successors, their survivors.

Yes, the point of all funeral rites is memory: a mental action, perhaps even an immaterial one; but we exercise our memories by performing some sort of overt act with those tangible, corporeal parts of the dead—"the remains" in the usual sense of the term—and to forget this is to risk disparaging, desacralizing the body even in life. And this may point us toward that other feature found in most, if not all, funeral customs: the element of continuity, communion, even commensality; which

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last has taken the form of everything from sedate memorial dinners to the Archaic Greek practice of placing feeding tubes in graves, through which the heirs of the dead could pour libations of wine and oil into the throats of their decomposing fathers: a grisly enough custom to our delicate modern sensibilities, but one that makes the point clearly enough. We want our dead friends and relations to continue dining with us, even as Don Giovanni invited the Commendatore to dine with him, sharing our food in what is (so primatologists inform us) the most basic social ritual, not only of our species, but of our entire zoological order. Feeding the dead, or letting the dead feed us; somehow, these do not seem all that different; and so the Greeks and the Indians of Herodotus' story may not, after all, have been beyond reconciliation.

V

The dead, we say, would wish to be "left in peace." On the other hand, they also wish to be remembered—and this must mean, remembered in all their individuality, all their particularities. But who, then, best remembers the dead? Not necessarily their kin and heirs—they in fact may have the strongest motives for forgetting them, for covering them up and concealing their debt to them. Nor is it only their friends: enemies, even those with whom they have actually been at war, may sometimes remember most vividly those whom they themselves have killed. The complex and haunted feelings which white Americans have about the Indians provide one instance of this; and so also does the *Iliad*, that ultimate classic which was such a formative obsession of our prototypical scientific grave robber/archeologist, Heinrich Schliemann.

The brawling chieftains of the *Iliad* are, to modern feelings, not a very sympathetic sample of humanity. Violent and predatory, they live mostly (as Thucydides already observed) by piracy and robbery: helping themselves to whatever they can get by force of arms. But even in the midst of this strenuously parasitic activity they show remarkably tenacious memories for the provenance of their acquisitions. Fighters will interrupt battles to recount the origins of their prized possessions—

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tripods, cups or armor—much as they recount their own genealogies; and it hardly seems to matter to them whether these were inherited from their fathers or plundered from some luckless victim of their spears: all are recalled with equal attention. Whatever the other limitations of their sympathies, Homer's heroes did not forget what they owed to the dead—even those whom they had sent down to the dust with their own hands. Shamelessly, they flaunt the predatory/parasitic relation which all the living have to all the dead. And in this at least Schliemann was fit to be their votary, with his lust to recognize those whose tombs he was plundering, to identify them with the names he "remembered" from Homer. "I have looked upon the face of Agamemnon," he said when he lifted that famous gold mask from Mycenae. Well no, it can't really have been Agamemnon, say the more chronologically exact diggers who have succeeded him—but then, who was "Agamemnon," except for the memories and the imaginations cherished about him? Schliemann, who did at least imaginatively identify himself with his "Agamemnon," with his "treasury of Priam," may be closer in some ways to the Amerindians who *feel* they belong to "their" people's bones than he is to the academically trained custodians of our museums, who in any number of ways may have a more factually accurate knowledge of the materials in their collections. Communal identity is not always easy to pin down precisely, after all. When I walk through my favorite graveyards, enjoying the stones which have become so familiar to me, I do not look different, outwardly, from a pious descendant of one of the colonial families buried there; but insofar as I am appreciating them historically or aesthetically, do I not in some measure approach the "cold, heartless, scientific" attitude toward these relics, even though I am not subjecting them to the more intrusive probings of physical or chemical analysis? Yes. . . . and so at last I too am somehow a kindred spirit of Schliemann's—but whether more akin to his romantic or his predatory side, it would be hard for me to say.

Modern, scientific archeologists are not at all comfortable with Schliemann and his willful ways, even though he is the founder-hero of their own profession, any more than modern people generally can feel comfortable with the primitive warrior kings of the *Iliad*. But Schliemann, in all his contradictions,

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remains a totemic figure, not only of archeology, but of much else in our Western-based but increasingly global culture—it seems strangely appropriate that much of his "Trojan" hoard, purloined by him to Berlin, and lost in the murk of the Second World War, should now resurface in the newly-liberated Russia: that is a tale Homer himself would have loved!—and Homer is still the premier classic of the Western canon, whose heroes, with their catholically memorious recycling of the artifacts of the dead, may serve as tolerably useful models for a rough ethic of predatory piety: alike in our dealings with the moldering remains of the human dead (ineluctably dissolving into their organic-chemical components) and with all the eternally recycling elements of the organic world.

"So they held the funeral of Hector, tamer of horses." That is how the *Iliad* ends, after a gruesome and spiteful series of combats—the detailed recital of which is often as tedious to the modern reader as the experience of being trapped in a bar with a clutch of rabid sports fans who recall every tiresome play from some game of twenty years ago—with a funeral, and a reconciliation. After Achilles has vented his hyperbolic wrath, outrageously desecrating Hector's corpse, he reverts at last to normal humanity, recognizing his common bond of life and death with the Trojans, and yields the body back to Priam for a decent cremation—the very "decency" to be sure, which so outraged the Indians of Herodotus!

But still: if Achilles and Priam could finally be reconciled (even in the midst of war) over the body of Hector; if the Greeks and the Indians at the court of Darius could somehow recognize the human value of each others' customs; it should not be impossible (now that everyone has, in however vulgarized a manner, been touched by some recognition of a global unity embracing the whole Earth) to achieve some kind of reconciliation over the treatment of all our dead. And perhaps we need not, and should not, look for too exclusive, too precise a definition of our attitudes. As I, walking among the stones of my familiar graveyards, am simultaneously a tourist and an investigator, a votary and a voyeur, so should we all acknowledge the commensality of our feasts with the dead; with those with whom we shall all soon enough be. "*Sum quod eris*," do you say? Indeed: I shall be what you are; so shall we all.

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JOSEPH EPSTEIN

Love and *The Guinness Book of Records*

When Vivian called to ask me to take her to the memorial for Charlie Fairfax, I said of course I would. She doesn't get around all that easily anymore, and, besides, I hadn't really had a chance to say good-by to Charlie in life and this would at least be a way to say good-by to him in death. Charlie Fairfax was a strange guy, what in the old days we used to call a character. Running a saloon, I think I have met a character or two in my time, and Charlie, I believe, qualifies.

I knew Charlie off and on for more than thirty years, and I can't say that I ever came close to really knowing him, let alone to figuring him out. What I couldn't figure out in particular was him and Vivian. Charlie was married, had three kids, all daughters. He had dough. He lived in the western suburbs, in Hinsdale, which, in Chicago, is about as suburban as you can get. As a physician, even though he wasn't in private practice, he was pretty well settled in life. What did he need a love affair with the same woman for something like thirty-three years, and with a woman—though I feel a little dishonorable for saying it—who, for something like a third of that time, I'm not sure he was all that crazy about? Something here in this maybe for *The Guinness Book of Records.*

The reason I feel I oughtn't to be putting down Vivian is that she has been sick in recent years, suffering from emphysema, and then, too, she and I go back a long way. We went to high school together, to Von Steuben, in Albany Park, on the northwest side. Last two years in high school, we were a thing, Vivian and me. As I think back on it, Vivian was a courageous kid, way ahead of her time—the time then being the early 1950s—not afraid of sex or of much else. I suppose it's no big news now, but Vivian was the first girl I knew who made no

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bones about enjoying sex. This came as a revelation to me in those days, and a very useful reminder in later life.

Vivian and I were, in our small way, rebels in our high school, which was very Jewish, mostly lower-middle-class, and pretty conventionally ambitious in a Jewish lower-middle-class kind of way. Vivian wasn't Jewish. Her father had been killed in World War II and her mother worked as a legal secretary in the Loop. My mother was Jewish, but my old man wasn't; and he and my mother divorced when I was nine years old. He took off for the Coast and eventually dropped out of my and my younger brother's lives. Vivian and I had an absence of fathers in common, also non-Jewish names, which, at our high school, put us a bit on the outside of things; or at least made us feel a little odd and outside. Among ourselves we used to make fun of the other kids at Von Steuben, with their ambitions to go on to medical and dental and law school, to move out to the suburbs, to live the good and careful life, which I guess most of them have long ago succeeded in doing.

That life wasn't for us. Vivian and I, we thought of ourselves as different, above all that, much deeper and more daring. We loved jazz, Charlie Parker especially. We tried everything together that there was to try then: drinking, smoking a little grass (this was in 1954), sex. Perhaps the only thing to be said about our sex is that, fun and exciting though it was at the time, we never conned ourselves into thinking we loved each other. To have done that would have gone against our general feeling about ourselves as rebels.

Vivian kept up the notion of being a rebel long after I dropped it. For her it took the form of becoming interested in art, in painting and dance and music and theater. I suppose she was what, in those days, used to be called a bohemian. This was long before, like now, everyone in the country became a bohemian. For a while she tried to make a career as a painter, but, for whatever reasons—I suppose lack of talent among them—it was no go.

Neither of us went to college. On my side, the money wasn't there, and, the truth is, I wasn't all that good a student. I suppose I could have gone to Wright Junior College—"You can't go wrong with Wright," kids in the neighborhood used to joke—but I didn't see much point in it. Instead I went to work,

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lived at home and helped out financially; my mother's salary from selling housewares at Marshall Field's wasn't much, even in those days, though people used to make a big deal of the ten percent employee discount on all merchandise. I tried out construction, selling home-improvements, finally bartending. I liked the bartending, its odd hours, its limited responsibilities, the opportunity it offered to meet girls; I wouldn't be surprised if even its lack of respectability wasn't part of the attraction. Anyhow I stayed with it long enough eventually to buy Flaherty's, the joint on Halsted Street I own now, a pretty successful joint, if I do say so myself, thanks to the gentrification of the neighborhood that took place fifteen or so years ago, which turned a neighborhood bar into an upscale joint for the young.

Vivian, who took the commercial course at Von Steuben, became, like her mother, a secretary after high school. Only she never for a minute really thought of herself as a secretary. She moved to Hyde Park, sat in on an occasional course at the University of Chicago, hung around the bar called Jimmy's on 55th Street, and worked at secretarying just enough to pay for her apartment, a two-room basement flat on Blackstone off 53rd Street. She worked at the medical school, which is where she met Charlie Fairfax. When they met, he was thirty-two, she was nineteen. The year was 1956.

As Vivian once explained to me, those were still the days when the brightest guys in medical schools, especially at places like the University of Chicago, became research physicians. The possibilities for big dough hadn't yet come into play for doctors, like today, when a doc has practically to be an idiot to shovel in less than five, six hundred grand a year. Charlie was apparently considered one of the brightest of the bright. He was also from a good family. He was already long married, had two kids, a third one on the way. But he fell for Vivian in a big-time way, and she did for him, too. In Albany Park she never met a guy even remotely like Charlie Fairfax. I don't suppose Charlie ever knew anyone quite like Vivian, either.

The memorial for Charlie was held at a lecture hall at the medical school at the university. Charlie's specialty was public health medicine—his interest was in epidemics, and I guess he was an important guy in his field. At one time, in his late fifties, Vivian told me, Charlie was even being considered for the job

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of Surgeon General. I myself can't see him as Surgeon General. Charlie didn't seem, or even look much like, a doctor. He had none of the self-importance, none of the pompousness, of most of the doctors I have known. In fact, I was once in a bar with Charlie, where he was taken for a cop. "What's yours, Lieutenant?" I remember the bartender asking him. I thought it was pretty funny, and so did Charlie in his sort of subdued way.

Charlie was thin, tall, with a high forehead, close-cut, thick black hair. He always wore a blue suit, striped, button-down-collar shirts, variations on a red-knit tie, plain-toed cordovan shoes. He wore a raincoat, no lining, right through Chicago winters; never wore a hat. He had no hobbies—unless you count Vivian as his hobby—and he didn't have much small talk. For some reason, he knew a lot about Broadway musicals: Cole Porter, Gershwin, Rodgers and Hart, that kind of stuff. He would smile, though not all that often. I don't think I ever saw him laugh. He must have had a lot on his mind, Charlie, what with his job, his teaching, and what I think of as his two wives.

I sure as hell would never have recognized Charlie from what was being said about him in this hall at the University of Chicago. It seemed clear to me that Charlie was a mystery to most of the guys who worked with him. One guy got up to talk about how valuable Charlie was when, many years ago, he worked at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. Another guy talked about how effective Charlie was in meetings with the other professors at the university, and this was mainly because he was respected for being so reasonable. Someone else talked about his mastery of details and willingness to take on the tough jobs no one else wanted to deal with at the medical school. One guy spoke of Charlie's work as a teacher, a researcher, and an administrator—and said that we really ought to consider Charlie's life and *careers*. (I thought it made more sense the other way around: his career and lives.) Another guy got up, a neighbor of Charlie's in Hinsdale, also a physician, and talked about how Charlie hated to rake leaves. Everyone laughed. Big joke.

As I listened to all this crap, sitting toward the back of the hall, I thought to myself, Charlie, baby, you fooled them all. Quite a performance, Charlie, very impressive. You had them all faked out of their socks, my man. These guys droned on,

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professors making their little jokes, but none of them had a clue to the man they thought they were talking about. None of them knew diddly about old Charlie, dead at sixty-six of a heart attack, even though some had worked with him for thirty-five years. Anyhow, this is what I thought, as I sat there listening to these dummies gabbing away, their clueless talk accompanied by the heavy breathing of the woman sitting alongside me, Vivian, Charlie's unknown, undeclared, but in every other way true second wife.

Vivian's breathing, from her emphysema, was made even more difficult than usual by her struggle against tears. It occurred to me that she was enjoying all this stuff said about Charlie, taking it all in, secretly, in her own mind, playing the widow. Meanwhile, Charlie's actual widow, seated on the stage with her and Charlie's three thick-legged daughters, also seemed to be enjoying these little tributes to her husband, laughing in all the right places. I had never seen her before, and always wondered what she looked like. She was a bird-like woman, I thought, small and churchy looking, and, like her daughters, thick in the calves—not at all the kind of woman I would have figured Charlie to have married. But then go figure Charlie.

Among the many things I didn't know about Charlie and his amazing life was if his wife—Susan was her name—knew about Vivian. Vivian of course knew a lot about Susan, but I don't think she had seen her for more than twenty-eight or twenty-nine years, when she, Vivian, briefly worked as Charlie's secretary at the medical school. Charlie never talked about his wife around me, though he knew I knew he was married. It was a subject we left alone, like knowledge that a guy's an alcoholic on the sly or has a strong taste for black women. When we'd go out, Charlie and Vivian, me and other, usually different women, it felt to me exactly as if Charlie and Vivian were married—and, toward the end, not too happily married at that.

I myself have been married once, for roughly eighteen months, in my late twenties. It was long enough for me to recognize that I wasn't cut out to be a husband. A guy comes into my joint one night, he's just off a divorce after a long marriage, and he tells me that the thing about marriage is that it's one year of flames and forty years of ashes. That, for me,

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about gets it, except that I could only take about six months of the ashes. But not Charlie, who must have liked being a husband enough to want to do it twice, with two women, simultaneously.

If I keep referring to Vivian as Charlie's second wife, it's because it wouldn't make sense to call her Charlie's mistress. Having a mistress to me implies paying a broad's rent. Charlie never did that; besides, Vivian didn't need it and wouldn't have wanted it if she did. A mistress also implies ownership, the woman being there at the guy's convenience. Charlie and Vivian's arrangement wasn't anything like that. Toward the end, I sometimes thought, it was closer to the truth to say that Vivian was there for Charlie's inconvenience. She drove him crazy sometimes. She relied on him, true enough, but never for money. By the time she was in her mid-twenties Vivian had given up on trying to make it as a painter, and took a series of jobs working at art galleries on Michigan Avenue and, later, along the Chicago River. She never made a fortune, or anything like that, but she did all right. Her own high opinion of herself seemed to get her good paying jobs. She didn't need Charlie for his money.

In the early years, Charlie would occasionally take her with him on his trips to Atlanta; and, later on, he might buy her something extravagant—a watch for a grand or so, maybe, or maybe some French luggage—but money was never at the heart of their relationship. At the beginning, I always assumed, sex was at the heart of it, and love—why not?—and maybe it gave them both, Charlie and Vivian, a way to escape the lives they were supposed to be living. Sex was no small thing to Vivian. She had theories about it. The leading one of these was that a person shouldn't go too long without it. She was also very good at it, ready to act on her curiosity. When I think back to our little fling in high school, in our sex it was Vivian who led, as if we were on the dance floor together, who called the turns, who was the teacher.

Vivian's views on sex, I have since come to think, were essentially those of a man. She wanted a lot of it, and she didn't have much conscience about whom she did it with. She was also ready to go out and get it. In the same way a man goes after a good-looking unescorted woman in a bar, she was capable of

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going after a good-looking man. She was herself less good-looking than interesting looking; she had these hooded eyes, deep and very dark brown, that were powerful with suggestion; hers was a face filled with promise, or so anyway I always felt. Did her sleeping with so many different guys have any effect on her? I really don't know. Why did she do it so easily? What the hell, she must have thought, why not, you only go around once.

I saw little of Vivian in the early days of her affair with Charlie. In my twenties, I was struggling to get started in life myself. We would talk on the phone once a month or so, but three or four months might go by when we wouldn't see each other at all. I do remember the night she first introduced me to Charlie. I had been working behind the bar at Flaherty's maybe two months. Vivian walked up with him. Both of them seemed out of place in the joint, which was strictly working class, but Charlie even more so than Vivian. She introduced him to me as Dr. Charles Fairfax.

"Charlie'll be fine," he said, reaching across the bar to shake my hand.

He drank a martini, of which we didn't sell too many at Flaherty's in those days, didn't talk much, let Vivian gas on about him and his interests. He seemed a little humorless to me. Maybe meeting Vivian's old friends—like me, a bartender who hadn't gone to college—was more than he, Charlie, had bargained for. I thought maybe he was a snob, but I was wrong. What I did learn at this first meeting was that he didn't give a damn about sports, local politics, or most of the other things that interested me or the other jokers at Flaherty's. I couldn't be sure what interested him, except his work, and I was in no position to talk with him about that.

You knew as soon as you met him that this Charlie was one of those lucky people who other people want to like them. Your liking him wasn't of all that much interest, or so everything about him seemed to suggest. I remember thinking that it would be nice if I could have this guy's respect, though I wasn't at all sure how to go about winning it. I thought that, somehow, if this guy liked me I would maybe be elevated a little bit in my own eyes.

I didn't yet know that Charlie was married. Vivian told me about that later. When she did tell me, she also told me that he

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was very serious about her. Having been involved in lots of casual affairs, she knew, she said, when a man was serious.

"What does serious mean?" I asked. "Is he going to leave his wife and kids for you?"

"No," she said, "and I wouldn't want him to. When I say he's serious, what I mean is that he's going to stick around. He's not an ordinary guy, Charlie. He's nuts about me. And he takes responsibility."

I wasn't sure what was behind that last sentence. What did it mean for a married man, father of three kids, to "take responsibility" for a woman when he had no plans to leave his wife for her? I asked Vivian what she meant.

"All I know," she said, "is that Charlie will be around whenever I need him. That's all I really need to know." How she knew, I never discovered. But she was dead-on right.

Did Charlie know what he had gotten himself into? Did he ever want out? What did he think those many nights on those long drives on the Eisenhower or Stevenson Expressways home from Vivian's various apartments on the near northside back to his home in Hinsdale? I used to wonder how Charlie brought off his schedule. What did he tell his wife when he returned home at two-thirty in the morning on a Wednesday night? He was a scientist, after all, and maybe he told her that he was working late nights in his lab—or some lab—at the university. Or maybe he had somehow, early in his marriage, established that his comings and goings were not to be questioned. Maybe he told his wife that he travelled more than he did; and maybe many of the nights that he left Vivian's in the early morning hours, he returned to grab a couple of hours' sleep in his office in Hyde Park. Who knows? It wasn't something I ever felt close enough to Charlie to question him about. But I always thought it was a damn impressive piece of work, his bringing all this off for more than three decades.

I suppose Charlie was what a guy in the joint the other night, referring to someone else, called "a chaos merchant"—someone who can put up with tremendous amounts of tension and confusion in his life and keep on going. I've seen the type myself. Guys who are in trouble with the IRS, are cheating on their wives and business partners, have cancer, serious debt, the Mafia on their tail, are being blackmailed, and yet still find time

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to dress well and, when out for an evening, try to pick up a young waitress. Amazing characters—how they do it, I don't know—but guys like this do exist.

What made Charlie different is that, in spite of the disorder that his relationship with Vivian brought to his life, you could see in everything about him—in his manner, the way he dressed, the cars he drove (a series of very dull Dodges)—that he longed for order. He used to take Vivian shopping for groceries, he picked up her dry cleaning, he did her taxes. He tried, without much success, to get her to cut down on her smoking. Vivian, a bohemian for life, cared very little for the everyday details of living, even as she grew older. With Charlie around, though, she didn't have to worry too much about them; he looked after them for her.

I remember Vivian was living in a studio apartment on State Parkway, just off Rush Street, the night she and Charlie had me up for dinner. It was a simple enough meal—steak, baked potatoes, a salad, a bottle of Chianti—all prepared and served by Charlie, in his usual get-up of blue suit, striped shirt, red tie. I recall his slipping his jacket on after serving us and sitting down himself to join us in eating the food he had just set out on the table.

"He's a good cook, Charlie, no?" said Vivian.

"A terrific cook," I said. "I'd marry him myself," I added. A pretty bad little joke, under the circumstances.

"Sorry, sport," said Charlie, "but I'm afraid I'm already spoken for."

"Yes," Vivian put in, "Charlie here's a happily married man."

I had sailed us in dangerous waters—that much was plain. I hoped to sail us out of them, as best I could, with the tact learned behind the bar.

"I'm not too expert on the subject of marriage and happiness myself," I said, "so I think I'd like to change the subject. Charlie, where did you buy these steaks? They're terrific."

"Why change the subject?" Vivian said. "Happiness and marriage is a great subject—one of the greatest, though Charlie is the only one at this table who can tell us anything of interest about it."

"True enough, Vivian and I have touched on it a time or two," Charlie said. "But never with very felicitous conse-

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quences, wouldn't you say, Vivian?" Charlie had a way of raising his left eyebrow when asking a question that could be a real conversation stopper. That eyebrow said, Ah, want to be unpleasant, do you? If you do, you've come to the right place, friend. This was the first time I had seen him make use of this eyebrow move, and it worked beautifully. "The steaks," he said, "come from Stop & Shop in the Loop. They are good, aren't they?"

The subject of marriage never came up again when I was with Vivian and Charlie. They did, though, have a number of not quite full arguments but maybe skirmishes is the better word in my presence that made them seem—I don't know how else to say this—very married. But it would probably be a mistake to think that Vivian felt herself a disappointed woman, as if she pined away for the marriage that never happened. Near as I could make out, she liked her arrangement with Charlie. It gave her the fairly steady attention of one man and, with it, all the freedom of a single woman.

Vivian took every advantage of that freedom. I said earlier that she was like a man in her sex interests. Maybe I ought to qualify that by adding that she was like a man without very good taste. Like a number of women I've known, I think Vivian was stimulated a little by the quality of worthlessness in men. Over the years at Flaherty's I've seen her go off with some real dogs; studs, maybe, but dogs nevertheless: weight lifters, guys with ponytails, every kind of phony artist-type, half-in-the-bag ad agency pricks, frauds of one kind or another. Usually nothing much came of it; nothing more than a quick roll in the hay, or so I always supposed. Vivian never went into details, though, for some reason, she didn't hide any of this from me either. Maybe she looked on me as family. In a way, I guess that's how I look upon her, even now.

Once, though, about ten years ago, a guy named Leslie Weiss moved in with her. He was five or six years younger than Vivian. He was handsome, with thick hair that he wore over his ears. I never saw him wear anything but Levis and work shirts, which was a funny get-up for a guy who didn't seem to do much work. He claimed to be writing a novel. He never finished it. He was a drinking man, pretty well hooked on the sauce. Vivian would bring him into my joint and often we'd find ourselves

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scraping him off the bar at the end of the night. I'm not sure where Vivian thought this was going, but it was evident to me that in this guy Leslie she was doing charity work of a kind that wasn't exactly tax deductible.

During her Leslie days—which went on for nearly a year—I found myself worried more about Charlie than anyone else. Naturally, with this guy Leslie camping out in Vivian's apartment—she was living on Oak Street at the time—he, Charlie, saw very little of her. But he came into Flaherty's a lot during that year. Charlie wasn't a guy to cry in his beer, and so he didn't tell me much about what he was feeling, but you could see he was hurting. It was like his wife was cheating on him, except that Vivian wasn't his wife and that he was the one who had been cheating for years.

It must have hurt Charlie like hell to think of Vivian with so inferior a character as Leslie Weiss, though he never knocked him to me. On those nights when he came into the joint, he would ask me if I had heard from Vivian and if everything was all right with her. I would tell him that, so far as I knew, she was fine. She, meanwhile, if she planned to come into the joint with this Leslie guy, always called first to check to see that Charlie wasn't there. Once, when Vivian was there with Leslie, Charlie showed up late and Vivian had to introduce Leslie to him. There wasn't much conversation between the three of them. As I remember it, Charlie's left eyebrow seemed up much of the time. I was behind the bar myself that night. At one point, Leslie returned from the men's room and asked Charlie where Vivian was. Charlie took a sip from his martini, set the drink down, and said—it isn't a line you forget, especially since I never before or after ever heard Charlie use the word—"She's attending to her cunt just now. She'll be along presently. Have another drink."

When Leslie finally cut out—I think he claimed he had a job teaching at a community college in New Jersey—things between Charlie and Vivian went back to what they once were. Maybe not quite back to what they once were. Vivian moving Leslie in with her must have seemed an act of serious infidelity to Charlie. They were still together, but something was different. Charlie was as attentive as before—running Vivian around for groceries, picking up her cleaning, doing her taxes—but

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when they were together his eyebrow seemed to be more in action than I had remembered.

Vivian is one of those people who, if you're going to like her, you got to agree to allow her to say stupid things, otherwise you'd spend all your time arguing with her. She might, for example, call some schmuck brilliant who obviously isn't, but, you figure, what the hell, she wants to think of this schmuck as a genius, let her. She had a need to seem still young, Vivian did, and so she claimed to enjoy the junky music of the moment, or she would defend what seemed to me goofy plays or paintings, or say that she thought a man wearing an earring was a sexy thing. I always took a pass when this kind of thing came up, let it slide off my back. Charlie used to do the same, but no longer.

"Tell us, Vivian, what it is you find so fetching about the male earring," I once heard him say. "I'm sure you have thought the subject through thoroughly and have fascinating ideas about it."

Once the singer Bobby Short was in town, at the Park East, to play an evening of Gershwin songs. It was Vivian's birthday, and Charlie arranged for a very good table for four; I joined them with a woman I was seeing at the time. There was a kind of tension in the air. Bobby Short wasn't as good as he was on records. He seemed to be shouting the songs. The service was lousy, the drinks worse. Charlie and Vivian missed few opportunities to zing each other. Quite an evening. I felt as if I had brought a woman along so that we could both watch an old married couple go at each other and be pleased that at least we weren't married.

"Well," said Charlie, after paying for our drinks, "Bobby Short may not have been much, but Gershwin still has a little something. He's almost up there with Mick Jagger, wouldn't you say, Vivian?"

"Go to hell, Charlie," she answered, turning her head away to exhale a cloud of cigarette smoke.

In recent years, I saw Charlie and Vivian less often. I opened another saloon, and had to be on the premises there more than at Flaherty's, and so sometimes missed them when they came in to the old joint. I would see them for dinner maybe once every three or four months, and sometimes we would meet to listen to some new jazz pianist or cabaret singer Charlie had discovered.

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But whenever we did meet, it struck me that Charlie's left eyebrow tended to be in action a good part of the time. "Jesus, Charlie," Vivian said to him one night, when we were listening to some guy play and sing Cole Porter in the lobby bar of the Knickerbocker Hotel, "if I need a lot of criticism, I'll read the fucking Sunday *New York Times*."

Vivian didn't need any more criticism than life itself had given her. A guy in my new joint the other night said that, after forty, a woman could keep either her face or her figure, but she had to lose one or the other. But Vivian, poor kid, seemed by fifty to have pretty near lost both. She had grown heavy and now had a puffy look. The sixty or so unfiltered Pall Malls she smoked every day gave her face wrinkles that make-up couldn't cover up, though it seemed to me she was using more and more make-up, which only made matters worse. She always dressed dramatically, but now her clothes called attention to the fact that she was too old for them. Like a lot of people who work too hard at staying young, Vivian was aging badly.

Charlie, though, hung in there. Near as I could tell, he wasn't seeing Vivian any less. He was still running errands for her, still trying to bring some order to her life. He was driving his Dodge at all hours up and back from Hyde Park, the near northside, and Hinsdale. Meanwhile, of course, he had his own suburban family. His oldest daughter, who had married and was living in Boston, had made Charlie a grandfather. He was flying fairly frequently down to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. He had complications to attend to at the medical school at the University of Chicago, where, because of the neighborhood, he once told me, it was no longer easy to get the best young men to take teaching and research jobs. But still he found time to take Vivian shopping or pick her up at the dentist's or remind her to put her fur coat into storage. With Vivian, Charlie was nothing if not dutiful. He was, I thought, a kind of model of a Jewish husband, without of course being Jewish or, in Vivian's case, a husband.

My own guess is that some of the things that kept them together so long were not so different from what keeps many long-married couples together: laziness, fear of the unfamiliar involved in finding someone new, the power of sheer goddamn stubborn habit. But in Charlie's case I think maybe it was

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something else, too. I think maybe Charlie felt a deeper responsibility for Vivian than a normal man would feel even for a wife of many years. If he left a wife, at least she could sue him, come away with a little dough. If there were children, they could look out for their mother. A broken marriage, no matter how bad the feeling, at least leaves something behind. But a love affair that goes on longer than most marriages nowadays? What does that leave?

I have no idea how Vivian's life might have turned out without Charlie on the scene, but maybe he felt that, without him, she would have had a more settled life. I don't know. Her contempt for the lives now led by the people we went to high school with was pretty strong. If she yearned to be married or a mother, she never whispered a word of it to me. You never know for sure about these things, but my own sense is that, without Charlie, Vivian would have been a lot worse off.

That, though, wasn't the way Charlie saw it. The only time we talked about it, Charlie and I, was after Charlie's first heart attack—it was his third heart attack that killed him—and I visited him at Billings Hospital. Before the visit, I called first, to see if the coast was clear. I didn't want to run into Charlie's wife or any of his kids; I had to remind myself that I was part of his secret life.

It was one of those grey Chicago days in March. A layer of dirt-darkened ice was on the ground, with candy-bar wrappers, dog crap, even a few coins, frozen underneath. Black guys walked by with knitted Chicago Bears caps pulled down over their ears. Billings, which once had a great reputation as a research hospital, now, with so many poor blacks in the neighborhood, seemed more like an African airport than a hospital. Not a great place to die, I thought.

"So what're they telling you about your condition?" I asked soon after I found my way to Charlie's room.

"There's not much they have to tell me. My father died of coronary failure when he was fifty-two. I had an older brother who died of the same thing at fifty-five. I suppose I have to consider myself ahead of the game."

"What about taking good care of yourself, Charlie, diet and exercise and all that?" I chose not to mention tension and stress.

"I long ago decided that I intend to die as I've lived. People

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who wrap themselves in cotton after a heart attack generally peg out soon after anyway. I think what'll happen now, no matter what I do, is that I'll undergo a few more heart attacks until, sooner or later, the finisher comes."

Not much to say in answer to that. Charlie was, after all, a physician. It wasn't my place to give him the Knute Rockne pep talk.

"When I'm gone it may not be so easy for our friend Vivian," he said. "I wish I could tie things up better than I'm going to be able to, but, under the circumstances, there isn't going to be much I can do."

"For example?"

"For example, there'll be no mention of her in my will. And I haven't made the kind of money that would make it possible for me to leave her a decent sum. I wish I had."

"My guess is that she doesn't expect anything like that."

"Do you think that, without me, Vivian would have married, had children?"

"I don't think so, Charlie. I think a part of her always considered that kind of thing not for her. Vivian has always had strong ideas about herself, and I don't think life in a suburb with kids was ever among them."

"Still, if I hadn't interceded in her life, it would have been much different today."

"My own opinion is that maybe it would have been worse."

"No way of knowing that. Meanwhile, I did intercede, and when she was just a kid. I have a responsibility."

I told Charlie that, allowing that it even existed, I thought he had more than fulfilled that responsibility. I told him that he had made Vivian's life better not worse. I told him that he had been, along with all else, a dear friend and like a brother to her. I told him a good deal else that I can't remember now. But what I can remember is that he didn't seem to buy any of it.

Charlie never really recovered from that first heart attack. Thin to begin with, he suddenly began to seem thinner, even emaciated. And grey; not just his hair, which had already gone grey, but his skin began to take on a greyish look. The skin of his face seemed to sag, the bounce had gone out of his walk. And there was a new look in his eyes, not a look of terror

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exactly, but maybe a look that implied that death, his own death, was not far off, which of course in Charlie's case it wasn't.

After his first heart attack, Charlie seemed more gentle with Vivian. He no longer felt the need, evidently, to straighten her out all the time when she fell into what he considered bad taste or damn foolishness. None of that mattered much now.

In his weakened condition, late night drives back to Hinsdale were out for Charlie. Still, he would pick her up every week or two after work, run the old round of her errands, and then they would have an early dinner together. I joined them once, for coffee and dessert, at the end of one of their early dinners, this one at Convito, on Chestnut just west of Rush, a few weeks before Charlie died. He looked awfully tired; his shirt collar seemed too large for the loose skin on his neck. Vivian remained Vivian, jabbering away about some avant-garde play she'd seen the night before at the Steppenwolf Theater, an unfiltered Pall Mall in her fingers wreathing her in a cloud of smoke, as she pitched into a piece of Amaretto cheese cake. Charlie sat there, letting her rattle on. I thought he seemed at that moment less like her lover than a father who was tolerant though not altogether pleased at how his daughter had turned out.

I was the one who called Vivian to tell her about Charlie's death. I knew she didn't read the paper, and when I saw the announcement of it in the *Trib* obituary page, I thought maybe it would be better if she heard the news from me.

"Oh, shit," she said, "poor Charlie. There was so much I wanted to tell him. I wanted to tell him one last time how much I loved him. We'd been through so much. I wanted him to know how much I loved him."

"Charlie was a pretty smart guy," I said. "He must have known."

"Do you really think so?" Vivian said.

"I know so," I said.

Did Charlie know? Did he give a damn? Was love the point of his thirty-odd years with Vivian? What the hell was? Well, Charlie, I thought, as I hung up the phone after this conversation with Vivian, it's done, all over. You did what you could. Nothing more to be done now. It's quits, Charlie. You're off the hook at last.

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DEAN FLOWER

Nabokov and Nastiness

> Each of these cases Cumnor and I had been able to investigate, and we had never failed to acquit him conscientiously of shabby behavior.
>
> —Henry James, *The Aspern Papers*

Nobody has worked harder than Brian Boyd to deliver Nabokov from accusations of shabby behavior. Now that his two-volume 1200-page biography is complete,[1] the theme is unmistakable: Nabokov may have invented some nasty first-person narrators—a rogue's gallery of arrogant, narcissistic, manipulative, vain, sexually perverse, and cruel men—but he had nothing in common with them. Boyd denies the popular image of Nabokov as a haughty aristocrat who taunts his readers and skewers his critics unmercifully. This is only a mask, Boyd assures us, a persona invented to fend off prying interviewers, "the person I usually impersonate in Montreux," as Nabokov himself put it in 1970. But the *real* Nabokov, says Boyd, was warm and kind, the tenderest of husbands and fathers, a man whose moral sense was *always*—and still is—exemplary. "When Vladimir Nabokov's reputation for arrogant aloofness was at its height, in his years of fame at the Montreux Palace Hotel," Boyd tells us, "he was *in fact* known by all the hotel servants as gentle, joking, generous, anxious never to offend or to demand too much." (Italics mine.)

Nabokov learned his compassion for the servant, the Jew, the prisoner, from his father—V. D. Nabokov—whom Boyd characterizes as profoundly affected by the suffering of others and endlessly courageous in their defense. Since *Speak, Memory* fairly throbs with Nabokov's admiration (and deification) of his father for exactly these reasons, Boyd would seem to be on firm ground here. But he is so concerned to deify Nabokov in his

[1] VLADIMIR NABOKOV: The Russian Years, by *Brian Boyd*. Princeton University Press. $25.00. VLADIMIR NABOKOV: The American Years, by *Brian Boyd*. Princeton University Press. $35.00.

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turn that he insists the son was a perfect pupil. Boyd tells the story of the fourteen-year-old Vladimir leaning back to have a servant remove his boots ("sometimes as a boy he aped his father's hauteur") and getting roundly chastised for it. He never behaved that way again, Boyd claims. He misses no opportunity to construe Nabokov as a moral replica of his father. Giving an account of V.D.'s compassion for a Jew victimized by rabid anti-Semitism in 1913, Boyd leaps to find a connection with Nabokov's compassion for Lucette in *Ada* (1969): "The man many readers thought had projected himself into the imperious Van and Ada Veen *in fact* cared more for their outclassed, overshadowed, frail little sister and victim, Lucette." (Italics mine.) Boyd consistently denies that Nabokov ever projected himself into cruel, insensitive characters.

What happens when Nabokov himself describes his own cruel insensitivity? This occurs in *Speak, Memory* when Nabokov remembers ditching one of his best friends in order to go butterfly hunting. No matter that the boy's father has just died, the family has been ruined, and—unable to afford the train—the boy has bicycled twenty-five miles in order to spend a few days with his friend. Vladimir still must indulge his obsession, his "demon":

> On the morning following his arrival, I did everything I could to get out of the house for my morning hike without his knowing where I had gone. Breakfastless, with hysterical haste, I gathered my net, pill boxes, killing jar, and escaped through the window. Once in the forest I was safe; but still I walked on, my calves quaking, my eyes full of scalding tears, the whole of me twitching with shame and self-disgust, as I visualized my poor friend, with his long pale face and black tie, moping in the hot garden—patting the panting dogs for want of something better to do, and trying hard to justify my absence to himself.

The self-disgust here is unsparing, all the way down to its hypocritic tears and shameless visualization of the victim's suffering. But Boyd needs to acquit Nabokov of any shabby behavior. In his retelling, it becomes merely an episode of "the thoughtlessness of youth." Ignoring Nabokov's own judgments, Boyd rewrites the event as a famous scene from Jane Austen, Emma's callous treatment of Miss Bates at Box Hill, with Nabokov's father playing the role of Mr. Knightley: "it takes Knightley's strictures to bring home the cruelty of [Emma's]

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thoughtlessness, but she bears his reprimand 'as no other woman in England would have borne it.' " Nabokov, Boyd tells us, was just like Emma. He "had his own internal Knightley": "revering his father as he did he was readier than *any other child in Russia* to master his father's moral code." (Italics again mine.) Naturally Boyd must make the young Nabokov superior to every other child in Russia.[2]

Nabokov himself clearly knew better. Compassion, empathy, and selflessness may have come naturally to his father, but they did not to him, as *Speak, Memory* makes abundantly clear. But Boyd continually ignores or denies Nabokov's moral complexity, especially as it is revealed in the autobiography. Boyd dismisses "little, myopic Miss Hunt," one of the Nabokovs' English governesses, just as cruelly as the children who escaped from her care (bad eyesight!) did: "the boys soon put an end to her," says Boyd, happy to endorse their youthful wisdom.

Boyd reconstructs the more famous governess "Mademoiselle O" (in real life Mlle. Miauton) as a tiresome bore whose "voice streamed on unstoppably." Nabokov didn't gain a real sense of French literature from her, Boyd claims, and was unaffected by her voice. He misses not only Nabokov's guilty admissions of cruelty to Mademoiselle, but also his belated recognition of her "nightingale voice" and her deeper significance as an artist—a tutelary spirit, as the end of *Speak, Memory*'s Chapter 5 makes clear, whose "radiant deceit" evokes at once Tschaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, Baudelaire's "Le Cygne," and Mallarmé's swan sonnet ("Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui"). Feelingly, Nabokov concludes that she stood for "something . . . that I could appreciate only after the things and beings that I had most loved in the security of my childhood, had been turned to ashes or shot through the heart." But Boyd remains blissfully unaware of this lament. He only registers irritation with Mademoiselle, just as the adolescent Nabokov did.[3]

[2] Boyd even "argues" that Nabokov *père* was deemed *rytsarskiy* by eulogists after his death, a word which may be translated "knightly," as if that proved something.

[3] Boyd says in *The American Years*, p. 121n., that "Mademoiselle O" was written "before the autobiography was conceived," forgetting that he said in *The Russian Years*, p. 429, that "the order of chapters [in *Speak, Memory*] had been established in 1936, at the placing of the cornerstone, 'Mademoiselle O.' "

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The eldest of five children, Nabokov writes as if he were an only child. He liked to say that he had a "perfect past," in gratitude for all his parents gave him—"tender ghosts," as he felt their hovering presence in later life, "humoring a lucky mortal." But *Speak, Memory* makes most readers wonder how perfect the past was for the other children. Boyd is unconcerned to raise such critical questions. He characterizes Sergey, who was a year younger but bigger, as "timid, easily dominated" (as if to forgive Vladimir for doing that), "diffident" and often falling "victim to his brother's energy." Although Boyd quotes Nabokov's shamed admission that "there was not even any friendship between us . . . I could describe my whole youth in detail without recalling him once," he tends to minimize the guilt and dismiss Sergey as well. That Sergey was homosexual, that he died in a German concentration camp, clearly disturbed Nabokov deeply and affected (in very different ways) his characterizations of the homosexual Kinbote in *Pale Fire* and the Buchenwald victim Mira Belochkin in *Pnin*. But Boyd absolves Nabokov from any imputation of cruelty or indifference. He even suggests that Nabokov's "belated self-reproach" in Sergey's case had positive effects, strengthening his principles. But when Humbert Humbert indulges in belated self-reproach in *Lolita*, tormented by the recognition of his monstrous selfishness, his abysmal ignorance of Lolita's real self, the atrocity he made of her childhood, Boyd is relentlessly critical: "Humbert demonstrates how easy it is to let moral awareness turn into sincere regret after the fact, but how much more difficult to curb the self before it tramples others underfoot." An excellent point. Too bad that Boyd sees no connection between it and Nabokov's behavior.

Nicholas Nabokov, the author's cousin, gives a revealing account of him that Boyd quotes at length:

> Volodya always did everything with *une superbe sans égal*, and I was a bit scared of his awesome store of information. If I made a clumsy statement, or gave an inadequate answer to a precise question, or misquoted somebody's verse, he would scoff at me and tease me mercilessly.

Nicholas also remembers that "cousin Vladimir would invent a writer or a poet, a king or a general, and ask questions about his

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nonexistent life. The victims would get upset (especially cousin Olga) and call the teaser names." Boyd offers no comment about Nabokov's inveterate teasing, but it clearly continued into his adult life, not always harmlessly. Edmund Wilson, Harry Levin, and Andrew Field all became so wary of Nabokovian put-ons and traps that they began to imagine them when none were intended. Anecdotes about this make entertaining reading, and Boyd gives us quite a few. He seems unaware that Nabokov's merciless teasing might at least call into question, if not flatly contradict, his notion of Nabokov as gentle, deferential, warm, decent, and kind.

As usual, Nabokov himself is his own best critic on this score. The narrator of *Pnin* emerges fully as a character in the last chapter of the novel, one of the best self-parodies Nabokov ever concocted: he is wickedly funny but a cad and a mocker who has teased and tormented Pnin for years. "He's a dreadful inventor," says Pnin, and Nabokov persuades the reader to agree. In the final scene, Pnin escapes from the insincere apologies of this heartless manipulator and rides off into the wild blue yonder. Or seems to. For of course Pnin has no existence apart from the words of his creator, no matter how we may try to cancel and curse him. But Nabokov's stand-in, the teaser and mimic who has had so much condescending fun at Pnin's expense, is decisively rejected. Boyd misses all this, of course. He thinks the narrator simply "is" Nabokov.

Nabokov valued kindness and tenderness enormously, as Boyd repeatedly attests, summoning witness after witness to say how "extraordinarily kind, kind instantly" Nabokov was in his later years, "almost deferential," especially to secretaries, research assistants, servants, individual students at Wellesley and Cornell. "For Nabokov," Boyd sums up, "the ability to show 'staunch kindness' to others in the midst of one's own private agony is the highest of ethical principles. . . ." In Boyd's account the assumption is that Nabokov simply *was* staunchly kind to others. A more critical biographer would wonder why Nabokov found it so urgent to proclaim that principle, and indeed whether he himself managed to live up to it.

In the "Afterword" to *Lolita* Nabokov declares his ultimate desire for "a state of being where art (curiosity, tenderness,

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kindness, ecstasy) is the norm."[4] These terms, and their sequence, are not so obvious as they may seem at first. The first three concern immediately one's relation to others. By curiosity Nabokov means something like the opposite of indifference or self-preoccupation. Humbert's deepest sin was to be incurious about Lolita's self, and hence unaware of her suffering. Van and Ada Veen's criminal ignorance of Lucette's suffering can be traced directly to their suavely erotic and incestuous self-absorption. Nabokov's most tormented admissions of guilt, as recorded in *Speak, Memory*, are his failures of curiosity—failures to imagine the pain of others. "Curiosity" for Nabokov goes back to its Latin root in *cura*, meaning trouble, care, attention, pains, diligence, exertion. Good readers of Nabokov's fictions learn that it's a moral imperative to be painstakingly *curious* about them.

Tenderness for Nabokov designates a kind of transparency of the self that allows it to be permeated by others. It allows us access to what Nabokov likes to call pure time, time freed of its confining metaphors of measurement, sequence, and process. Kindness is made possible too by surrender of exclusive selfhood, and acceptance of our mortal kinship and kindredness. And beyond that lies ecstasy, or "aesthetic bliss," which for Nabokov is as close as we can come to understanding the creation itself.

Nabokov found his ideal curiosity hard to live up to. He kept substituting for it a predatory inquisitiveness, as Boyd sometimes unwittingly demonstrates. A research assistant at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology remembers, for example, Nabokov's "very probing interest in her parents' recent divorce" as well as his endless questions about "U.S. customs and attitudes." Of course, without that predatory curiosity Nabokov would hardly have been able to produce *Lolita*. But there were times when it got out of hand. Alfred Appel and his wife recall an unexpected visit from Nabokov when they were staying in Montreux. Pretending to be a servant, Nabokov knocked at their hotel door one morning and, in Boyd's words, "Nina Appel, practically undressed, ran for cover when the door opened, but both she and her husband could see Nabokov

[4] For a somewhat different account of these important terms, see Richard Rorty's valuable essay, "The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty," in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York, 1989), pp. 141–168.

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observing the room, taking it all in, watching how they performed when they were caught off guard." Andrew Field reported in his 1986 biography other episodes of Nabokov's voyeurism in Montreux (shadowing people in the street), but Boyd elects not to repeat them.[5] Of course, Boyd finds it easy to condemn Charles Kinbote's spying on his neighbor John Shade in *Pale Fire*, but sees nothing amiss when Nabokov does it.

Among many other things Boyd is incurious about, perhaps the strangest is Nabokov's asking his son Dmitri to beat him in the face with boxing gloves. Nina Berberova witnessed the scene in Paris in 1940, during the dark time when the Nabokovs were desperate to gain *visas de sortie* and Vladimir was gaunt from a recent bout with influenza: "Nabokov took a huge boxing glove and gave it to the boy, telling him to show me his art, and Mitya, having put on the glove, began with all his child's strength to beat Nabokov about the face. I saw this was painful to Nabokov but he smiled and endured it." Berberova passes off this grotesque scene as "training" for future hardships, and Boyd concurs. But it hardly seems the sort of lesson that Nabokov's father would condone, or that a Mr. Knightley would offer. And what for heaven's sake would it teach Dmitri about kindness, tenderness, and love?

Despite its size *The Russian Years* is a very weak book. Boyd is careful of facts and has done all his homework, thus improving mightily over his predecessor Andrew Field, but he has very little new information to give. He has no gift for describing the political ferment that Nabokov was born into, he keeps competing with *Speak, Memory* and flattening it, he halts the biography for long stretches of rather bossy classroom lectures on *The Defense* and *The Gift*, and he even throws in an introductory lesson on "Nabokov the Writer." Surely it's a bit late in the day for that? Field, for all his errors and omissions, offers a much richer idea of émigré life in Berlin than Boyd can muster.[6] But Boyd wants to create the illusion of a definitive study: cover everything and add seventy-five pages of acknowledgements, footnotes, and index.

[5] *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York, 1986), p. 353. Boyd misses no opportunity to point out the factual errors, omissions, and distortions of this book.
[6] See *Nabokov: His Life in Part* (New York, 1977), pp. 145–201.

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Things improve after 1940 because *The American Years* does much more than correct Field. It establishes the biographical background of Nabokov's writing in English as no other work has done: the early reviewing and lecture touring, teaching at Wellesley and Cornell, research at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology, the transcontinental journeys and butterfly-hunting vacations, the life in Montreux after he became famous. What's more, Boyd's command of the works written in English is significantly stronger—more original and critical—than it was before, especially on *Bend Sinister*, *Lolita*, the *Eugene Onegin* edition, *Ada*, and *Transparent Things*. The difficulty remains that he sees Nabokov's unpleasant protagonists as opposites or "inversions" of the author. Vadim in *Look at the Harlequins* is not really a parody of Nabokov himself but of "popular misconceptions of Nabokov the man and the artist." Nabokov creates this "inversion of himself," says Boyd, not because he's narcissistic but because he likes "to test his art and his happiness against its apparent converse." So too in *Ada* Boyd denies that the smugly self-indulgent Van and Ada, who are fatefully incurious about a younger sister until she commits suicide, have anything to do with Nabokov himself. "I loathe Van Veen," he quotes Nabokov as saying; Ada is "bitchy and lewd"; both are "rather horrible characters." As if that proved Nabokov was supremely dissimilar and detached.

Nabokov's moral terms are strong here exactly because he fears he resembles, or can imagine he resembles, these repellent figures. Otherwise he wouldn't so fervently have to *loathe* them. One of his favorite devices is to invent versions of himself—shadows, kin, near namesakes, parodies, potential selves—and give them interesting and even attractive features, intelligence and imagination, in order finally to condemn them. *In propria persona* Nabokov loved to point out the nastiness of his villains. "Dr. Kinbote is not a nice person," he explained to the French translators of *Pale Fire*, who were uncertain about how to render "a boy's seamed purse." "Hell shall never parole Hermann," he said of *Despair*'s narrator. Humbert Humbert, he said, is "a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear 'touching.'" In such monster selves Nabokov projected his own worst fears. Perhaps, just perhaps, he was *not* a nice person.

By clinging to his notion of auctorial inversion, Boyd makes

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a great confusion of *Pale Fire* and its autobiographic significance. He argues that John Shade "kills himself off" in order to project himself into the mad Kinbote, "as if to suggest the liberation of personality that may be possible beyond death." (Never mind that the story depends on Shade's *accidental* death, and that the accidental death of Nabokov's father, "the most grotesquely tragic moment of Nabokov's life," as Boyd rightly emphasizes, lies "at the center of this book.") Boyd wants to find ways to dissociate Nabokov from Kinbote. So he claims that Shade works through Kinbote's "envious rancor against Sybil" to send an "inverted tribute to their married love." In other words, every mad and cruel thing Kinbote does may be a kindly message from the supremely sane poet. Or else—having it both ways, of course—anything tender and kind that Kinbote expresses, like his sympathy for Hazel Shade or his admiration for Disa (whom he failed to love), must also be credited to Shade. "How does Shade's creation of Kinbote's mirror-world allow him to express what he cannot express directly in his own voice?" says Boyd, begging the question.

Boyd criticizes Andrew Field for distortions worse than Kinbote's, but he proves to be fully capable of Kinbotish obsession himself. He decides, for example, that Shade must be the real author of the index, because Kinbote is "not the sort of person to write a commentary deliberately riddled with ironies at his own expense." Neither one of them would *deliberately* do that, of course. Besides, Boyd has already shown that Kinbote supplies the index for the simple reason that it refers almost exclusively to Zembla, which is purely Kinbote's fantasy. Still uneasy with all this (for good reason) Boyd now claims to have evidence which "proves conclusively" that Shade wrote the index. He finds it in a cancelled draft of the "Foreword" to the 1966 revision of *Speak, Memory*—just as Kinbote claims to find his Zembla in cancelled stanzas of "Pale Fire":

> As John Shade says somewhere:
>
> Nobody will heed my index,
> I suppose,
> But through it a gentle wind *ex*
> *Ponto* blows.

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Nabokov revised away the reference to Shade, so there's nothing conclusive about this "evidence." He may have used Shade simply as a convenient mask for himself, and then thought better of it. The index he refers to, after all, is *Speak, Memory*'s, not *Pale Fire*'s.

When Robert M. Adams gently protested, in the course of a very favorable review of the biography, that Boyd's notions about *Pale Fire* do not make sense, Boyd's reply was to feign *une superbe* condescension: "I am amused to find [Adams] instructing me," he writes.[7] There is a queer literality in Boyd's conception of Nabokovian narrators. He wants to make either Shade or Kinbote the "real" author of *Pale Fire*, either Humbert or Quilty the real author of *Lolita*: "Why would such a man invent a Quilty who easily and humiliatingly manipulates him and steals the heart he so wants to win?" Boyd should know that through many of Nabokov's most interesting narrators other voices, other spirits, can be detected. No either/or decision is required. In "The Vane Sisters," as Nabokov once wrote, the two dead women speak "through the prism of [the narrator's] priggish praises." In "'That in Aleppo Once . . .'" both the letter-writing narrator and its recepient "V." (with his "prismatic art") write the story, and so too does the plot of *Othello* get into the act. In *Lolita* Humbert tries to write his confessions and keep control of the text, but he is bedevilled by "McFate" and "Trapp," shadowed and teased by Quilty and by a "clearly guilty" conscience that sabotages what he thinks he wants. Collaborating with Quilty, of course, is the author in anagramic disguise, "Vivian Darkbloom." In *Pale Fire*, that most pointedly prismatic "crystal land," the ghost of Hazel Shade (not to mention Aunt Maude, Boswell, Pope and a host of others) writes the story no less than Kinbote and Shade. All of them converge in Nabokov, or rather his imaginative self is *dispersed* in them. Nabokov wanted the experience of identity to be not solitary but multiple, like consciousness itself, penetrated by "intervenient auras" or edged with a "prismatic bezel." So he aspired to a sublime kindness.

[7] *The New York Review of Books*, April 23, 1992, p. 56.

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JOHN P. SISK

Evil by a Damsite

As college graduation neared in the middle of the Great Depression, I was anticipating my annual return to the wheat and cattle country of southeastern Washington where I was assured of being paid for the kind of ranch work I was thoroughly familiar with and loved. Suddenly, however, I was offered a position with the MWAK, the acronym for the consortium of construction companies that was building Grand Coulee Dam in the middle of the state. Sensing that my life had come to a time of turning, I accepted the offer, and two days after graduation was at work as a checker in the grocery section of MWAK's department store. The salary was twenty-two dollars and fifty cents a week, not bad when one considered that down on the job many responsible and much more hazardous positions were paying only twice as much. Certainly, I would have milked cows, weeded summer fallow, and gone cowboying into the Snake River canyons for much less.

I was of course overeducated for my position, but this was too common a condition in those stringent times to impress me or anyone else. In fact, the very magnitude of the whole operation tended to distract one's attention from such meanly personal matters. Here about seven thousand men worked three shifts a day with an immense amount of spectacular machinery, all aimed at harnessing the mighty Columbia River so that it would supply electricity and irrigation to light up the land, empower the industry, and make the desert bloom—that wilderness in which, as William Cullen Bryant says in his poem "Thanatopsis," the Columbia, given its Indian name Oregon, "hears no sound / Save its own dashings." The Dam would require over ten million yards of concrete; when completed it would produce a falls twice as high as Niagara and back up a hundred-fifty-mile lake. The final phase, the High Dam, would cost over forty million depression dollars, probably enough now to

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finance another war in the Persian Gulf. When in September of 1935 President Roosevelt dedicated the Hoover Dam he called it "a twentieth century marvel," but we all knew that the Grand Coulee Dam would be the Eighth Wonder of the World and dwarf Cheops' pyramid. To be part of an enterprise of such magnitude, even as a grocery checker, was an exhilarating experience in ego-deflation.

In the process of housing and servicing all these people a half-dozen small towns had sprung up. Apart from the company town, Mason City, and Government Town across the river, these communities appeared to have been modeled on the mining and cattle towns in pre-World War II black-and-white movies. There were few such urban amenities as paved streets, sidewalks, and streetlights. Hard-working and hard-playing people, migrants of the construction world, lived and played in these places. In the bars, where the liquor was cheap and plentiful, there was juke box music so that for ten cents you could rent the services of one of the taxi dancers, fresh-faced youngsters perhaps just out of high school, some of whom, I was told, could be persuaded to go upstairs with you for a bit more than ten cents. B Street in the town of Grand Coulee was notorious for its houses of prostitution. At my graduation the commencement speaker had warned us that we were going out into the real world and had to expect evils we were unfamiliar with but with which we should be able to cope thanks to values that had been instilled in us. I sometimes wondered if he could have spoken with such confidence if he had seen B Street on any Saturday night.

But there were evils closer to home for me. The company's cantonment in Mason City fed 1200 men a day in a great mess hall and housed them two to a bunkhouse. My own bunkhouse mate was an amiable veteran of Hoover Dam days who liked to write to his wife after supper and then go out prowling with his buddies. Often he came in drunk, waking me with his racket, and perhaps vomiting on his clothes after he had deposited them on the floor between our beds. This being an evil I could not cope with, I moved into more expensive quarters outside the company compound. Here I fell among some Texans who had taken over an unused room for late-night poker parties to which I was genially invited. Unfortunately, penny-ante college poker had ill

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prepared me for the Texas sharpies. The second night I played they took me for two weeks' salary, so there was no more of that—though the Texans, who were no fools, kept inviting me.

Instead I began to spend my leisure time more virtuously in the recreation hall where there was one billiard table. In college I had become fascinated with three-cushion billiards and had obtained from the Brunswick Company a pamphlet explaining and diagramming the diamond system, a combination of arithmetic and geometry that unlocks the secrets of that grand game. There were a half-dozen other three-cushion fanatics in town, none of whom seemed to know that the twenty diamonds located along the four rails were more than decoration. I began to do to my opponents what the Texans had done to me, except that less money was involved: the losers simply had to pay the rent for the table. Soon I was the acknowledged champion of the Grand Coulee area. My disgusted victims often referred to me as Willie Hoppe, who, because he knew the diamond system, once ran twenty billiards in tournament play. The best I was ever able to manage was a run of three bank shots, one of them a five-cushion shot, which not only impressed a handful of spectators but more than compensated for my embarrassment at poker.

My new roommate, who had early on warned me to have nothing to do with the Texans, had immediately struck me as a reliable, straight-shooting and plain-talking fellow who had come up the hard way and had no sympathy for the slackers, bullshitters, and complainers whom he saw as making up the bulk of mankind. He occasionally came in late at night, but always quietly and always sober. I doubted that his salary was much higher than mine but he owned an expensive and well-groomed coupe in which he sometimes drove me down to Sunday mass. An absolutely secular man himself (in reaction, I gathered, from a strict Protestant childhood), he nevertheless liked the idea that I was a regular churchgoer. Perhaps it suggested to him that I was a reliable character in a society peopled with time-servers and frauds. I had assumed that he was unmarried, but one Sunday after I returned from mass he said that he would like me to meet his wife. We drove up into the wilderness of B Street in Grand Coulee and went up through the unexpected Sunday quiet to the second floor of what I knew to be one of the more popular whorehouses.

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His wife proved to be a slender, attractive woman who carried herself with grace and confidence. She took me into a sort of parlor and gave me scotch and soda while her husband went elsewhere, perhaps to look over the books. Knowing that I was a college man, and having herself spent some time at a state university, she wanted to talk about those finer things that college people had in common. She had loved to read, had in fact read Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (still in the future for me), but had especially been interested in the dance, by which she obviously did not mean taxi-dancing. I would have preferred to learn something about her attitude towards her present occupation: was she perhaps what in later years I would have identified as the Polly Adler or Mayflower Madam of B Street? But she said nothing about her work, whether out of respect for my innocence or because she assumed that for the moment at least she and I existed in an enclave abstracted away from such gross matters.

On the way back my friend was likewise silent about his extralegal second occupation, as if being men of the world we both understood that it was nothing more than a way to augment income in hard times. Perhaps if I had asked how he had gotten mixed up in such an evil business he would have said what F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby says when Nick Carraway asks him how that crook Meyer Wolfsheim managed to fix the World Series: "He just saw the opportunity." He might have assumed too that Catholics were much more relaxed about such defections from conventional morality. In any event, I learned some years later that he had ended up in the penitentiary, having been caught transporting girls across state lines (a practical necessity in his business). There was no word about his wife. I hoped that she had seen the reversal as an opportunity to return to the university and pick up where she had left off with her reading and the dance.

Soon in the interest of saving money I went downstream a few miles to another ramshackle bedroom community and moved in with a group of fellow workers from the company store. When this ménage became uncomfortably crowded I moved again, this time into a nearby one-room cabin, which I rented from a local barber for ten dollars a month. Living like Thoreau now, I cooked my own meals and had the solitude I

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needed to write the weekly column I was contributing to the diocesan Catholic newspaper. At night when there was nothing else to do I lay on my bunk reading my only book, the complete plays of William Shakespeare. Now in the late summer afternoons there was time to run down to my private Walden Pond, the Columbia River, and practice my Australian crawl. I swam out to and around a little island located about forty yards offshore. The real test of strength then was to swim across the river, and occasionally tanned and frolicsome young men did so, going in groups of three or four. I was teased with the possibility of doing it myself after I had gotten in shape but gave up the idea when I learned that two swimmers in a party of four had been caught in the treacherous midstream currents and drowned. Many years later I visited the area with my children, wanting to show them my island. Not only did it no longer exist but the wonderful wildness of the shoreline was gone, as if when the engineers had finished with their Dam they couldn't resist a final opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of the mighty river.

If there was any opportunity in my position with the MWAK I did not see it. Like so many things one did during the Great Depression, it pointed to nothing beyond itself. It paid a living wage so that I could afford to write my weekly column, which paid me nothing. The checker's job was neither challenging nor creative. One had to be able to handle money quickly (I had already learned to do that as a racetrack parimutuel cashier), keep the cash register in balance, and remember prices (no problem for one who in high school had been required daily to memorize twenty lines of Virgil's *Aeneid*). However, there was the compensation of human interest. A grocery checker in that rough-and-tumble community was in the position of bartender: he got to know everybody, picked up the current gossip, scandalous and jejune, and on occasion was expected to function as confidant and father confessor, especially in the middle of the day when business was slow.

One morning, for instance, a swing-shift jackhammer operator lingered tentatively at the checkout counter after paying for his groceries. Normally he shopped with his wife, a handsome woman, and their small son, and I'd always enjoyed chatting with them. Now I sensed uneasily that he was about to

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tell me something I'd just as soon not hear. He'd recently made a date with someone else's wife, he said, but at the moment of truth discovered that he was for the first time in his life impotent. I had of course read about such things in books—even in those remote times you could find anything in a book. Besides, I had heard all about the mores of the community: with three shifts a day there was ample opportunity for this sort of extracurricular entertainment, night shift men being especially likely to be cuckolded. But I had never been face to face with a man who confessed to adultery, or at least an attempt at it, particularly when he had such an attractive wife whom he apparently loved. The contradiction put me back in the whorehouse with the Madam who had a taste for the finer things. I did not know what face to put on the matter: was I in the presence of tragedy, comedy, or farce? Had he failed, the man wondered ruefully, because he had felt so damned guilty? Out of the depths of my college man's ignorance I agreed that guilt was the likely explanation. A few days later when the three of them came through the checkstand they seemed normally happy together, and I could only assume that the guilt and the impotence were gone.

I also had to serve as confidant to the other checker, an ingratiating young man who spent a good deal of the time caressing the wave in his blond hair, and who when business was slow gave me detailed reports of his sexual exploits, perhaps to let me know that there could be life abundant even for a man who hadn't been to college. He was much taken by a vivacious young wife who appeared daily with her pre-school youngster. He considered her the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and was always unhappy when she came through my side of the checkstand. Then for several days she did not appear. One morning he gave me the appalling news that she had died suddenly after an abortion, the consequence of an affair she had been carrying on for some months. He kept shaking his head at the incomprehensible monstrosity of it: she had died being so beautiful. I thought of Edgar Allan Poe's definition of "the most poetical topic in the world," the death of a beautiful woman, but had the tact not to refer to it, sensing that what he was experiencing was not poetry but, perhaps for the first time in his life, the tragic complexity of good and evil.

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So it was the real world truly enough, and anything but dull. Meanwhile my billiard game was improving and so was my Australian crawl. On Sundays I could go hiking up the tawny ravines above the river or go downriver a few miles to the Nespelem Indian reservation where a primitive golf course had been carved out of the wilderness. I explored as much of the Dam itself as a man without a badge and a hard hat had access to. One Sunday I discovered an entrance to the eight miles of exquisitely tailored service galleries that honeycombed the great structure. I saw no one as I wandered around in that netherworld, uneasily aware that I was out of bounds. The only sound was the muted roar of the overrushing river, how far above me now, hearing nothing but its own dashings, I could only guess. I was to remember the sensation of being down there years later as my wife and I roamed late in a May afternoon through Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris looking for the grave of Oscar Wilde.

Distinguished visitors were always appearing on the scene. One morning the word was that James A. Farley, the Postmaster General, was standing in front of the local post office shaking hands with one and all. I went down there and stood in line to shake his rather limp hand. President Roosevelt arrived; we all went out to see him tour up the main street and then crowded into the public square to listen to his enthusiastic approval of what we were doing. Later on such notables as Thomas Dewey, Harry Truman, Prince Olaf of Norway, General Jonathan Wainwright, and even Hailie Selassie of Ethiopia showed up. To us who were natives of the Damsite, in fact, distinguished visitors were an expected commonplace: who would not want to see the Eighth Wonder of the World?

To me, however, the most memorable visitor was, at least when he arrived, distinguished for nothing. This was a lean, hawk-faced young man with intense eyes who showed up in the store one morning with a college classmate of mine and said that he wanted to talk to me about some urgent business as soon as possible. Since it was time for my midday break, I went with them to the company restaurant to confer over coffee. The stranger had come to town on fire with a plan: the publication of a weekly newspaper that would serve the Damsite not simply by publishing construction statistics and piddling local gossip in

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competition with the already established papers (about which he had the lowest possible opinion) but by telling the real truth about the place. There was no indication that he had been in the area long enough to know anything about it, but he had no doubt that it was ripe for and badly needed a first-class muckraking. Having learned from my friend that I had edited my college paper and was already an established writer, he saw me as the logical person to edit his paper. Given the intensity of his eyes and the sense he gave of being on fire with a mission the integrity of which was beyond question, I could only say that I was interested. Which in a way I was: writing for publication was always interesting, especially if, as at this point I assumed, there was money involved.

I met with him then three or four times, always during my midday break and always over coffee in the restaurant. His invariable companion was a tall redhead who contributed little to the conversation but seemed utterly enthralled by our charismatic leader. What part he was to play in our enterprise was never clear, but perhaps it was enough that he owned an old Plymouth touring car. Where our leader was living was not clear but he and the redhead apparently spent most of their time scouting around the Damsite looking for examples of the evil that was to be our business.

Of this he had found God's plenty, certainly more than enough to validate the warnings of the most pessimistic commencement speaker: local merchants gouging the public; landlords renting their clapboard shacks for exorbitant figures; the contractors wasting government money and doing a slipshod job to boot; apparently respectable functionaries shacking up with workers' wives; apparently respectable wives using their swing-shift freedom to take on all comers; the lives of construction workers being callously sacrificed to keep on schedule a project that was an appalling boondoggle; innocent young women being virtually enslaved in the cathouses of B Street. He was especially incensed by the corruptions of the latter place; exposing it would have to be one of our first concerns, an uneasy prospect for me given a residual loyalty to my old roommate and his refined wife.

Of course none of this would have been startling news to anyone who had been in the area a few months. What elevated

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it above the level of checkstand gossip and gave it urgency was the mad intensity of the speaker's eyes and the barely contained fury of his voice as he recounted some new moral atrocity. He was a true cacophiliac, a man in love with an ideal vision of badness. Like so many people I got to know in later years, especially in the sixties and seventies, he had apparently learned that the quickest way to feel virtuously alive was to discover evil, and having made that discovery he was hooked on evil, was in fact a cacoholic. If he had run out of badness he would, like the Marquis de Sade or Milton's Satan, have run out of life.

But his cacoholia had its effect on me by creating an atmosphere in which I was inclined not to ask nitpicking questions: When was all this going to begin? Who was going to do all the writing? Where would the start-up money come from? Was I to have a salary so that I could give up my job as checker? Nothing our charismatic leader ever said offered a clue to the answer of any of these questions. Perhaps it was the impression he gave of an immense but unspecified familiarity not only with the newspaper world but the world in general that ruled out as naively premature any consideration that would muddy up the abstract grandeur of our enterprise. The only concession he made to mundane realities was a remark that the local merchants would of course fall all over themselves to advertise in our paper—the same merchants, presumably, whom we would expose as price gougers and retailers of shoddy merchandise.

In our third meeting the redhead drove us to one of the neighboring communities where our leader expected to meet the mayor and get the lowdown on some civic corruption, exactly what he did not say. He went around to the back of the mayor's not especially mayoral shanty while I waited with the redhead in the car. After a while our leader returned, his eyes flashing with pent-up rage: it was the mayor's afternoon to be with his girlfriend. They drove me back to work and I agreed to meet with them in three days. Now that we knew what we were doing, our leader said, we could at last get down to particulars.

Under the circumstances no particulars were imaginable. Three days went by, then a week, without word from either of them. One morning I received my first-ever telegram, a long day letter from somewhere in Idaho. Here were particulars at last. I was directed to ignore all previous plans for the first

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issue, move the story about construction deaths to the first page, put the story about B Street prostitution on page two, confine all local gossip to the middle of the paper, and put all ads on the back page. But particular as all this sounded there was still the question of how one was to locate or relocate nonexistent stories in a hypothetical newspaper for which no ads had been sold. There was nothing to do but wait for more particulars. None ever came; I never saw either of them again. About a month later my old college friend came visiting again and apologized for the trouble he had caused me. My world-reforming leader with the mad eyes had apparently cast his spell over my friend too, but subsequent information had put those eyes in a different perspective for him. The man had escaped from an asylum in southern Idaho and was now back in custody, having turned himself in or having been captured was not clear. I preferred to believe that he had gone back voluntarily to the familiar evils of the madhouse, having learned that he could not cope with the exotic evils of the real world he had created. And I began to understand too why it had never occurred to me to ask where he had come from or what in particular he had done for a living: as if I had sensed that he was a kind of avenging spirit whose proper home and place of business was wherever evil was, which was everywhere.

In any event, it was a relief to be rid of the burden of having to reform the wicked world. I could give my undivided attention to three-cushion billiards and my Australian crawl, and spend more time with Shakespeare, where there were evils enough to satisfy the most rabid cacoholic. Fall and winter passed uneventfully and early in spring my salary went up to twenty-five dollars a week. But the more I thought of the coming summer the more I began to sense that I was coming again to a time of turning. So I gave up my checker's job and returned one more time to the wheat and cattle country, climbed on my favorite horse, and rode again into my kind of wilderness: the wonderful Snake River canyons. I liked to think that my lost leader, a few hundred miles to the south and in a haven now where his cacophilia could be lovingly tended to, was just as happily at work revising his imaginary newspaper as I was when I rode into rock-tumbled ravines looking for strayed cattle.

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GARY KRIST

Ironic Journeys: Travel Writing in the Age of Tourism

Contrary to what you may have heard, travel writing in the late twentieth century is not dead—at least not yet. Granted, the opportunities for authentic travel, let alone travel *writing*, have become increasingly rare. The wide-ranging influence of Euro-American popular culture, for one thing, has seriously undermined the particularity of many places on the globe, and those great modern homogenizers—television, radio, and newspapers—have virtually annihilated the ignorance of the larger world that once kept regional essences pure. Perhaps most damaging of all, the ever expanding juggernaut of mass tourism has by now reached nearly all countries on earth, threatening to turn every act of indigenous cultural expression into a self-conscious, profit-motivated exploitation of an increasingly fictitious "local color." But somehow, despite the ravages of cheap, easy transportation and the insidious high-concept packaging of foreign experience, travel writing remains a stubbornly resilient genre in our age. There exists today, apart from the service-oriented reportage of the guidebooks and glossy magazines, a large and often splendid literature of travel. And while the adulterated journeys described in these recent books may differ fundamentally from Marco Polo's to China in the thirteenth century (or even Graham Greene's to western Africa in the 1930s), contemporary travel writing still offers the principal virtues that have always characterized the form—including the giddy, beneficial jolt to the system that comes of experiencing, albeit vicariously, the physical and psychological dangers that travel inevitably entails.

One of the chief obituarists of travel writing in recent years

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has been the social critic Paul Fussell. In *Abroad*,[1] his delightfully gloomy study of British "literary traveling" between the wars, Fussell proclaims the current moribund state of the genre, casting doubt on whether travel itself is even feasible in the present age. "I am assuming that travel is now impossible and that tourism is all we have left," Fussell writes. He goes on to distinguish among explorers (who reached their prime during the Renaissance), travelers (who belong to the bourgeois age), and tourists (a product of what he calls "our proletarian moment"): "All three make journeys, but the explorer seeks the undiscovered, the traveler that which has been discovered by the mind working in history, the tourist that which has been discovered by entrepreneurship and prepared for him by the arts of mass publicity." Fussell, it should be mentioned, is a terrible class snob, and one suspects that much of his hatred for the age of tourism results from the fact that even his mail carrier can now afford to take the seat next to him on the plane to Zanzibar. But his main point is unassailable. Anyone who has done any "exotic" traveling at all in the past few decades knows that a direct, honest, unironic foreign experience is hardly possible any more. Once the profit opportunities of mass tourism became apparent (something that happened in most places in the years after World War II), it was only a matter of time before the touts, the unscrupulous taxi drivers, the tourism ministers, and the creators of bogus "folklore shows," "typical restaurants," and "local arts and crafts" moved in, turning previously genuine places into Disneyland versions of themselves.

And yet, and yet. The real life of a place, I maintain, often has a vitality that can stand up to even these depredations. The Caribbean islander who knocks off dozens of kitschy carved coconut heads for the tourists every day, for instance, does leave the hotel district at night and go home, where he'll sit around the local rum shop, drinking beer, flirting with the women who stroll by, and trading insults with his cronies. This is a kind of real life still, and while it may be difficult for a stranger to gain admission to it (particularly if he physically resembles the camera-clicking marks off the cruise ships more than he does members of the local population), it is not yet

[1] ABROAD: British Literary Traveling between the Wars, by *Paul Fussell*. Oxford University Press. $8.95p.

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entirely impossible. And there are still places that, lacking any easily marketable assets (scenery, beaches, architecture), have yet to be processed and packaged by the entrepreneurs. Such places, though they may be too unsafe and unappealing for tourism, still offer an opportunity for travel. Even Fussell, as pessimistic as he is, admits that travel is not necessarily stone-dead yet: "Perhaps the closest one could approach an experience of travel in the old sense today would be to drive in an aged automobile with doubtful tires through Roumania or Afghanistan without hotel reservations and to get by on terrible French." That, in fact, is precisely the kind of thing travel writers are still doing, and writing books about.

Fussell's mention of those doubtful tires brings up an important fact that has shaped much of the travel writing currently being produced: namely, that in order to travel in the world as it exists today, the traveler (as opposed to the tourist) must often create artificial obstacles for himself. When Graham Greene set off for inland French Guinea in 1935, he went on foot because that was really the only feasible way of getting where he wanted to go.[2] On the other hand, when Allen Booth departs fifty years later on a 2000-mile journey from one end of Japan to the other (recounted in his book *The Roads to Sata*), he goes on foot because he needs the imposed difficulty of long-distance walking in order to put himself in the way of experience.[3] A drive from one end of Japan to the other, unless the car's tires were very doubtful indeed, would not yield the same experience, would not be *travel*, even though it might take one through the very same places. (Fussell's hypothetical car trip through Afghanistan, on the other hand, could still qualify as travel because, quite simply, the roads in Afghanistan are terrible, the services virtually nonexistent, and the physical dangers very real, keeping alive the possibility of misadventure.)

This requirement of inconvenience accounts for all of the highly idiosyncratic journeys being made in recent travel books—journeys that are characterized more often than not by unorthodox means of transportation. Alastair Scott, in *Tracks*

[2] JOURNEY WITHOUT MAPS: Across Liberia in 1935, by *Graham Greene*. Penguin. $4.95p.

[3] THE ROADS TO SATA: A 2000-Mile Walk through Japan, by *Alan Booth*. Viking. $16.95.

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Across Alaska,[4] travels by dog sled; Robyn Davidson, in her own book called *Tracks*,[5] crosses the Australian desert by camel; and even Paul Theroux, when he chooses to travel by the pokiest local train in China or Bolivia, is responding to the same need—the need for slowness and complication in a world where transportation is too fast and too easy. That's why one feels slightly cheated by a journey like Thurston Clarke's in his otherwise superb *Equator*,[6] which describes his effort to trace zero degrees latitude all the way around the world. He makes the trip in short hops over the course of months or even years, flying home to the US between jaunts to South America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific. While Clarke does encounter his share of discomfort on the trip, one still feels that the integrity of his journey has been undermined somewhat by his free use of the conveniences of modern air travel.

But while the difficulty of pre-tourism travel can be artificially reconstructed, recapturing any kind of unspoiled sense of place is, after the vast dissemination of Burger Kings, "Dallas" reruns, and free-spending, easy-to-hustle senior citizens from Peoria, somewhat more difficult. In many locales around the world, however, genuine local color has given way to something that, in its way, is just as interesting to experience—the energetic, somewhat absurdist atmosphere that prevails wherever pop Western culture and traditional non-Western life meet. Few travel books written in the last twenty years are entirely untouched by this fundamental irony at large in the world. What even remotely honest travel writer, after all, could turn a blind eye to things like the Mohawk haircuts worn by the village boys in Bali, or else those Mongolian herdsmen whose dwellings lack running water but not a television set, VCR, and Sony Walkman (and where, if one asks, one discovers that the village headman's favorite movie is *The Sound of Music*)? People like Pico Iyer, in his slick but entertaining *Video Night in Kathmandu*,[7] have made much of this irony, rendering impossible any linger-

[4] TRACKS ACROSS ALASKA: A Dog Sled Journey, by *Alastair Scott*. Atlantic Monthly Press. $19.95.

[5] TRACKS, by *Robyn Davidson*. Pantheon Books. $5.95p.

[6] EQUATOR, by *Thurston Clarke*. Morrow. $20.95.

[7] VIDEO NIGHT IN KATHMANDU AND OTHER REPORTS FROM THE NOT-SO-FAR EAST, by *Pico Iyer*. Knopf. $19.95.

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ing sentimental notions of a "mysterious East," or a "darkest Africa," or even "that little unspoiled French village by the sea."

There are, of course, numerous different ways of responding to such deeply compromised environments. Aloof disdain is one all-too-common response, and it's the one that mars some of Paul Theroux's travel books. If Theroux dislikes a place, he keeps his distance from it, at least psychologically. Thus his insight into a country he finds unpleasant can often be blunted, a tendency more noticeable in his books about England and China (places he dislikes) than in those about South America and Southern Asia. Mark Salzman (author of *Iron & Silk*,[8] a delightful book about learning martial arts in China) has criticized Theroux for just this kind of hauteur. In his *New York Times* review of Theroux's China book, *Riding the Iron Rooster*,[9] Salzman points out that Theroux never really made any Chinese friends during his trip, and thus was never able to attain more than a superficial access to Chinese life. And some of Theroux's claims do betray a lack of penetration: "Like many features of Chinese life," he generalizes, "the food had glorious names, and each dish had its own identity and pedigree. But in practice they were almost impossible to tell apart, having not only the same taste, but the same color and stringiness." Anyone who has ever lived among the Chinese, however, recognizes that the alleged sameness of Chinese life is superficial—the product of economic necessity and ideological will—and that beneath the enforced conformity lies a vital and irrepressible variety (just as the individuality of specific Chinese dishes like "Seven Stars and a Moon" is often masked by the poor quality ingredients and indolent labor that are the curse of China's current political incarnation).

Theroux's brand of disdain is a hazard increasingly difficult for travel writers to avoid, given the current spoiled state of the world. As places become farther and farther removed from their roots, as they become more and more like each other, they, paradoxically perhaps, become easier and easier to misinterpret. An unsympathetic eye will dwell cynically on the quaint absurdity of jungle dwellers in Borneo wearing Ma-

[8] RIDING THE IRON ROOSTER: By Train through China, by *Paul Theroux*. Putnam. $21.95.

[9] IRON AND SILK, by *Mark Salzman*. Random House. $16.95.

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donna T-shirts, and will stop there. A sympathetic eye will penetrate deeper, as Andro Linklater does in his sardonic but unfailingly respectful *Wild People—Travels with Borneo's Head-Hunters* (no, they don't hunt heads anymore, but they do keep some old ones around the house as totemic objects).[10] Similarly, one of the strongest parts of Thurston Clarke's *Equator* is the chapter on Christmas Island. Clarke is certainly not blind to the island's bizarre clash of traditional Polynesian culture and the Western world, but he doesn't allow it to sour him. So, rather than hopping the next train out of town (which would have been impossible on Christmas Island anyway), he sticks around to learn more. The resulting report on the way the family long house has endured the lashings of modern times—much altered, but with surprisingly deep-seated links to traditional attitudes—is travel writing at its current best.

Perhaps the difference I sense here is not just one of personality. There are, it seems to me, two distinct species of contemporary travel writers—those whose journeys are primarily expressions of the self against the background of the world, and those whose journeys are more outwardly projected investigations *of* the world. Theroux belongs to the former group, as do writers like Tim Cahill and P.J. O'Rourke (travel writing's answers to gonzo journalism). Cahill, in his recent book *Road Fever*,[11] writes about a 25-day driving odyssey from the southern tip of South America to Prudhoe Bay, Alaska. His intent in the book, obviously, is not to report objectively on the lands that he and his rally-driver accomplice speed through. Rather, these foreign climes are treated mainly as backdrops for Cahill's usual histrionics—manifested in this book as the quest for a desperate, extreme, distorted state of mind he calls roto. Similarly, O'Rourke's travels in his recent *Holidays in Hell*[12] seem primarily an excuse for irreverent (and, frankly, hilarious) riffs on the stupidity of non-American ways of life. I don't mean to sound negative about these books; actually, travel books of this type are often more readable than the more conscientious efforts of the other species. But these books tend

[10] WILD PEOPLE: Travels with Borneo's Head-Hunters, by *Andro Linklater*. Atlantic Monthly Press. $19.95.

[11] ROAD FEVER: A High-Speed Travelogue, by *Tim Cahill*. Random House. $17.95.

[12] HOLIDAYS IN HELL, by *P.J. O'Rourke*. Vintage. $10.00p.

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to be, above all else, expressions of a posture toward the world; the true subject is the author's sensibility, rather than the world encountered by that sensibility.

At the other extreme is a writer like John McPhee, who treads the overlap region between travel writing and journalism. In *Coming into the Country* (his classic investigation of Alaska), the author's own personality is virtually negated, distilled to a sympathetic, sometimes ironic, always attentive observing eye.[13] McPhee's gift is his ability to dig deep enough into his subject to find its inherent interest—something that he has been able to unearth in several of the most unlikely areas of inquiry, from the Florida orange industry to the arcane geology of southern Nevada. Jan Morris, the Welsh travel writer, is similarly gifted with this kind of negative capability. Her *Hong Kong* is a vivid, almost breathless celebration, a rhapsodic portrait that needs no imposed personal high jinks to keep the interest level up.[14]

Between these extremes lie some of the best examples of recent travel writing. William Least Heat Moon's masterful *Blue Highways*[15] describes a journey that begins almost as a kind of therapy—the author made his decision to drive the back roads of the US on the same day that he was fired from his job, the same day that his estranged wife let slip a comment about a new man in her life. But the therapy of living "the real jeopardy of circumstance" proves not to be some on-the-road psychodrama; Moon soothes his emotional uneasiness by *seeing*, by listening to the people he encounters. In that way, his book partakes of the best of both poles of travel writing—it is true to the observed world while at the same time infusing it with the urgent purpose of self.

This kind of psychological quest—coexisting with the physical journey—is an important aesthetic element in much of the travel writing being produced today. The quest is what gives form to the recounted journey, providing it with a vital sense of beginning, middle, and end. One of the problems with many travel books, I believe, is their lack of such dramatic shape. That's why so many of them are—despite exotic locales and

[13] COMING INTO THE COUNTRY, by *John McPhee*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $19.95.

[14] HONG KONG, by *Jan Morris*. Random House. $19.50.

[15] BLUE HIGHWAYS: A Journey into America, by *William Least Heat Moon*. Little, Brown. $18.95.

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peoples—simply dull. To be honest, I have probably abandoned more travel books in my reading life than any other kind of book. Even the great ones can sometimes be frustratingly uncompelling. For instance, Colin Thubron's *Behind the Wall*,[16] a brilliant, well-written, intelligent, and insightful book about China, is nonetheless extremely difficult to get through. In fact, I still haven't been able to finish it, though I've made several well-meaning attempts. The problem, I think, is that the book lacks what E.M. Forster has famously regarded as the only possible merit of a story as story: that of making the audience want to know what happens next. For all of its other virtues, Thubron's exploration of the Middle Kingdom, deficient in dramatic shape, fails to inspire that elemental hunger for completion. And this failure mars many less exalted travel books. Clearly, a fascinating subject does not automatically secure a reader's fascination, which explains why a book about a visit to Alabama can be far more compelling than one about a trip into the jungles of New Guinea or Laos or the Amazon Basin.

The book I have in mind—the one that manages to turn up the rare and fascinating in as humdrum a place as backwater Alabama—is *Hunting Mister Heartbreak*,[17] the most recent effort by the British writer Jonathan Raban. Raban is my favorite kind of traveler, the kind whose first reaction to a new place is to look around, rub his hands together, and tell himself: "I could live here." Whether or not he really *can* is irrelevant; the attitude is what's important. And Raban actually comes quite close to his goal. He is a true chameleon, able to mold himself to an astonishingly wide variety of environments—from lawless and exhausted Key West to burgeoning, optimistic Seattle to gracious but disturbingly insular Guntersville, Alabama. In each place, he invents a new, if somewhat ironicized, version of himself (John Rayburn in Guntersville, a man called Rainbird in Seattle), and proceeds to imagine himself into that person's life. He succeeds remarkably well, and the effort seems to give him unusual access to the life of the places he visits.

Significantly, the only less-than-successful portrait in the

[16] BEHIND THE WALL: A Journey through China, by *Colin Thubron*. Atlantic Monthly Press. $18.95.

[17] HUNTING MISTER HEARTBREAK: A Discovery of America, by *Jonathan Raban*. HarperCollins. $25.00.

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book is that of New York City—the place that Raban finds hardest to imagine himself into. Despite some wonderful sections on the history of Macy's department store (in which the author sees the recent socioeconomic metamorphosis of the city writ small), Raban's view of New York remains somewhat two-dimensional and clichéd. He sees the city as split neatly between what he calls the Air People and the Street People, the former rarely descending from their high-rise apartments, seeking in all things to distance themselves from the sordid lives of the latter. While there is much truth to this schema, there is also much simplification, and I feel that Raban, like Theroux, has here allowed his distaste to get in the way of his subtlety.

Much better is Raban's take on Guntersville, and on the South in general. He has done a superb job of explaining the contradictions of a culture equally enamored of guns and gardens—one that is characterized as much by racism and xenophobia as by warmth and hospitality. As John Rayburn, this Englishman is accepted into the community with surprising speed, and is offered a glimpse of the South that might have been denied him had he been, for instance, a Yankee American. (The myth of Britain's support of the South in the Civil War still persists, perhaps explaining the alacrity with which Raban was taken up by the residents of Guntersville.)

But even Raban is not a complete chameleon, and his picture of Guntersville is probably just as subjective, just as distorted by the lens of personality, as anyone else's would be. Is this the "real" South he has given us in *Hunting Mister Heartbreak*? Who can say? In the deeply compromised world of the 1990s, the "real" South—or the "real" New York or Bali or Amazon jungle—is long gone, if it ever existed in the first place. All we have to work with, then, is Raban's South, Theroux's China, Davidson's Australian outback, and O'Rourke's Seoul, as skewed as they may be. But that is nothing to lament. Travel literature, like all literature, has always gained dimension by revealing as much about the observer as about the observed. And no matter what degradations we perpetrate on the places of the world, there will always be new and different eyes to witness the atrocities. That's why travel writing continues to flourish, and why—eloquent doomsayers notwithstanding—we will probably not see the genre's demise for a long time to come.

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TOM WAYMAN

Country Incomplete

Nothing is ever finished
in the country:
house after house where siding
goes only part way up the walls
while around the dwelling are objects
once intended to be repaired or altered:
a pickup with its engine
on blocks beside it,
a hole in the ground that some Spring years ago
was to be a swimming pool,
an empty shed designed as a workshop
but never roofed: warped plywood covering half of it
and wire netting the rest
from months it served as a chicken coop.

Indoors, the situation
is identical: a sink not quite hooked up
so if you want to wash yourself
you fill a basin in the tub.
Or, a main floor with recognizable areas:
a corner with dishwasher and stove,
a spot where the couch, rug, stereo are grouped.
All that's absent
—and has been for as long as anyone can remember
—is the studding and sheetrock
to create rooms
(actually, studs *are* in place around the toilet,
with old blankets nailed across them
to serve as combination privacy screens and door).
These inconveniences, meant to be temporary,
soon get considered merely
arrangements—exactly as in other houses

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someone did hang ceiling tiles
or has installed the linoleum.

From a distance, men and women in the country
seem to regard time as infinite:
what isn't completed today
won't get done tomorrow either.
Partly the problem is
that whoever wants to resume work on a project
must obtain a certain size of clamp
or a particular electrical connector
in town. These missing components
are on a list somewhere
perhaps lost under a car seat
or in the space behind the refrigerator.

> To adults, years when cupboard doors aren't hung
> or the back steps built
> are only an interval
> in a busy life. One day, however,
> a son or daughter is through with school
> and leaves home, and the parents realize
> their offspring's entire childhood
> was spent on a construction site.

Yet if an excuse is needed
for all this delay
any of us in the country have only to gaze
out the front window (still tacked in place,
waiting to be properly insulated).
The mountains, river, even the garden
are never finished either:
erosion, the seasons
go on shaping the natural world
into a series of transitional forms.
In the city, there is an illusion of closure:
in whole districts a majority of houses
appear to have every board
neatly in place, painted, with lawns

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perfectly clipped and edged.
Yet in a city, too, rain and wind
are always present
and, inside, time
is taking the bloom off the fanciest wallpaper.
Underneath the metropolis, creeks
that once drained this region
and are now constricted into pipes
surface after a storm
in the middle of an avenue
or the basement of a highrise.
Like rural people, water and weather and time
are never satisfied
but constantly start to transform the environment,
then become distracted
and initiate an additional project
they believe will also help them feel at home.

Such tentativeness, though, is more noticeable
in the country. Thus maybe poems
about nature, and especially about the lives
along back roads and gravel lanes,
shouldn't be brought to a
resounding conclusion
but,
instead, . . .

Waley, Waley

The boat will drift the last distance
to the dock
and I will climb out
and smell again
the pine forest along this side of the river
and the sweet woodsmoke
of the village chimneys.
At the front of the small crowd
waiting for me

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is my wife, my bride,
with my young son in her arms
and Rachel, my daughter, peering
from behind her.
Then we are embracing,
and me awkward with the boy,
he squirming, Rachel shy, withdrawing.
But my friends
press around us
shouts of joy,
and laughter.
There are many present I thought
I would never greet again
—Dennis, with a witty quip
I only half hear, but no mistaking
his hug, Dave joking as before,
"Glad to meet you,
partner," handshake,
others, too, everyone excited with
bits of conversation
crossing and being misunderstood
and corrected with hilarity
and inquiries after missing friends.
Then we are all walking
the street, the log and plank houses
of the village
little changed from my memory of them,
people I don't know coming to doors and windows
to watch us pass, calling out,
members in our group bantering back,
laughing, Dennis says: "It's almost a parade."
"A procession!"
a voice at the rear cries.
And she walking beside me
her hand in mine, the flesh
soft and tight and familiar.
We enter the yard
of the rough wood synagogue
where the rabbi has come to the porch door

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to receive us. I stand a pace or two from the others
alone before him
for his blessing,
his lined face hardly aged
as he leads the prayers.
Something tugs at my fingers:
Rachel has darted forward
to seize my hand, watching the ground
but holding fast. The small crowd thins
when we turn back to the street,
dispersing into the smoky evening
with promises to meet tomorrow.
The four of us
my family
journey a little further to the old house
and enter.

She moves through the rooms
arranging supper
and settling the children
while I watch: amazed to be once more
inside these walls, under these roof beams,
crossing these wood floors.
She shows me the newest
domestic changes: cloth she has woven
for the table, a new bench
by a window. And the latest
domestic problems: a sticking door latch,
where water is seeping around a fixture.
As of old, I begin to plan
how to tackle these,
the steady decay and resurrection of this house,
of any house, a rhythm I did not know I missed.
And then the meal, and the baby to bed,
and going in with her to Rachel,
and Rachel asking,
when I bend to kiss her,
"Will you be here in the morning?"
And I say: "Every morning. Now."

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And Rachel turning over drowsily
under her covers.
Then seeing to the house lights,
suddenly awkward with each other,
the bedspread aglow in the last soft flame.

I waken deep in the blackness
and lie listening to the silences
of the house, its breathing
and creaks.
As carefully as possible
I swing my legs out
and stand naked in the room.
I move to the window
and shift the curtain,
looking out at the ridge
that rises to the west behind us,
its trees darker shapes
in darkness.
It is very late
yet I notice a light where Larry, the closest neighbor,
has come outside to shiver at the stars.
Perhaps the opening of the curtain
caught his eye: his face, lit by his open door,
swings to face this house, and he waves,
waves a welcome.
He points upwards, to remind me, perhaps,
of his old habit of checking the stars,
then he shrugs and goes in. The hour, the river beyond
the village, the forested mountain
are mine.

When I turn from the window,
her eyes, bright with love,
are watching me. We smile at each other.
A moment later I will be back in bed,
sharing a final kiss
before sinking into the warm
eternal
night.

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PATTIANN ROGERS

The All-Encompassing

Philosopher in Meditation, Rembrandt

The philosopher is the old, bearded
man in the red beany, dozing,
it seems, in the sun by the window.
Before him on the table lies his ponderous
volume open to the indirect
light of the day.

But the philosopher could be
the bent fire-keeper by the wall
behind the stairs. He stirs, rouses
the coals, studies the combustion.
He's hunched and crochety there,
concentrating obviously as he constructs
his viable conflagration.

The solid spiral, helix staircase,
curving down the middle of the room,
could be the philosophy, each step leading
naturally and logically to the next.
It's the physical form of ordered thought
reaching a grand staircase conclusion.
The carpenter, then, is the missing seer.

Yet the small round door (dwarf-size),
behind the old man, rightly accepts,
by portal philosophy, that it must meditate
on its closed and locked condition
until a key appears, at which time
it must assimilate the revelation of *open.*

Does the blind black in the corners

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beyond the reach of the window radiance,
as well as the cavern maw at the top
curve of the stairs, match the oblivion
in the sleep of the thinker? If so,
then the sun works a philosophy itself
by realizing the window ledge, the pottery
on the sill and idle book, the folded hands,
the dropped chin. And the old scholar
sleeps in the light of the known.

O philosopher's meditation, don't you understand,
even the baskets and barrels and pots
and smoke of this hovel that split
and bang and cling, and the fire-keeper
cracking his throat, and the bucket
of ashes and clinkers on the hearth,
and each separate meditation in its place
and time, all these must take their positions
in the rhetoric of the system?

If I hear the ancient housewife rattling
and creaking now down the curve of the stairs
(old gene, spiral of conception, old twist),
dogs scrambling at her heels, broom
and dustpan knocking, if she enters here
with her raucous retinue, cursing and barking,
jolts the sleeper, sweeping under the old man's
stool, cuffs the fire-keeper, sets the pans
and spoons swinging, then all previous
suppositions fail, and we must begin again.

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Life and Death: All the Lost Accordions and Concertinas

You may wonder yourself what happened to them.
They're at the bottom of the sea.
Some people saw them floating downward,
discarded, sinking slowly into that foreign plane.

They were humming and chording
all the while, inside a confetti of bubbles,
their bellows expanding, opening
like the folded fins of butterfly fish.
Their leather straps were fluttering
behind them like ribbon fish, writhing
like eels, attached like lampreys.

A cargo of concertinas sailed
the salt surface momentarily bobbing
like a fleet of air-filled jellyfish.

Down they all went, schools and cities
of them, turning and tumbling,
mother-of-pearl buttons gleaming,
keys and reeds quivering.

They recline there yet where they settled,
half-buried in muddy sand, tilting
on cliffs of coral, bobbled and nosed
by jacks and rays. Their bodies
teeter, bowing, contracting
to the tempo of the surf.
They wheeze and blow nightly
with the currents, singing like sirens,
shimmering in their treble, tenor treble.
Their sound is the same sound

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you can imagine hearing if beds of waving
seaweed were a chorus of violins.

They take in and give forth their element.
They breathe and moan, those eternal
lungs. They speak. They are greater
than ghosts.

Their soliloquies circle the wide sea,
rippled and meditative, are heard
by nursing blue whales,
who answer.

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RICHARD TILLINGHAST

The Winter Funerals

The postman totters up our street. He's late
Or early, like spring, or he doesn't come at all.
You practice your violin, I go for a stroll
And watch the oysterman tarring his boat
That the storm stove in—the rough weather that brought
The lines down that night after New Year's
When the farmers' faces ran with tears
Outside the house where Mary Flatley was laid out.

We've brushed our black clothes off and put them away.
Someone is cooking, someone's out tending the stock
In the grainy drizzle that settles the coalsmoke.
Obscured up there in the weathered sky,
The wind that troubled our winter still blows above
The village. We drink it at night with our whiskey
And stir it into our morning tea,
Hearing the tune Charlie played over Maggie's grave.

That drowsy reel's feet danced in the new-dug mud
Of the grave, and held its drained face up to the rain
When he played it slow on his dark accordion—
That grievous dancestep Charlie played.
It follows me out this morning up and down
As I buy a stamp or run an errand
And go for a pint at Flatley's tavern,
Where Mary's smile is nowhere to be seen.

Nowhere in the pipesmoke and mirrored coolness
Where she heard the farmers' chaff with a tolerant ear.
Nowhere to be seen but present everywhere
Amid the slow talk and the Guinness.
Her smile followed the gossip—predictable

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As the stuffed pheasants in their glass cases,
Old as the posters for the Galway races.
She gave a love that was almost invisible—

Like the voice at the foot of the garden, the thorny warble
I hear when I get home and pull on my boots
And squelch out among the cabbages and beets
To spot that spring voice, invisible
Or nearly so, that weightless, sparse-feathered
Heartbeat that lilts in the battered garden,
That sings its song for no sound reason
And dies among the thorns unheralded.

You practice your music. I sniff the wind for a sign,
While down in the mud the cabbages glow
With a green persistence. All day you play
That tune, that same old tune, till it's right as rain.

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Afterward

Outside, the silence of another night
waits for the whine of the crickets.
Somewhere along the rim of this tired valley
a star called Sirius shines madly,
a little tide rises and falls,
naked in death.

The music has gone, days of words
won't let this body escape.
A destiny loosens
in the meaningless sounds of waves
and the hissing of strange wood fires.

Voices of others cover my eyes,
the benevolence of time along railway tracks
you travelled once.
Go nearer yourself, my child,
so you can recognize Time.

Something like light
begins to risk the sullen darkness.
If I were to say a prayer,
it would only be another language
on my tongue, a tiny shape of light
waiting to touch the water of the sea.

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Enterprise

If there were only words, I'm afraid we'd lose
dignity, be without fear of choosing sides,
swinging visibly from rage to realization
to terror, and perhaps come to the conclusion
that our lives must have been worth living.
If there were those words between us,
footsteps in the garden of conscience.
What has come between, I dare not know;
this silent walk side by side, the fear
of weightlessness hanging in the air,
the stubborn city of noises moving away—
these demonstrate their power over us,
the shape of a living thing that becomes
a moment and thickens to the soft crackle
of the wood-path under our feet.
Would I bear responsibility for that wrong
that came through me and be purified by it?
Beyond the trees, an endless night
whose past pins me to the earth; and I,
wanting the past not to be that past,
and the sense of an empty hand still pressed down
over the photograph of an impossible exultation.
What is left of love are those pardons
unlike water to earth or bird-songs to spirit,
standing alone like victims,
with their unacceptable pleas of innocence.
A wind stands silent at the window,
holding perhaps a trust more sacred
than I could think of. A new depth of solitude.
And I could not tell now if the pain
is all of existence at this moment;
it is getting darker, and any other words
would be mere attempts to cut our way through . . .

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CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY

After Another War

In the museum now,
they've finally got the heads
on straight.
A few years back
in Wyoming, when drought
exposed a cave bottom
submerged beyond all memory,
complete and intact frames
were pulled to light
from the deep and oil-dark mud—
they realized then
that even for a dinosaur
they'd had the wrong,
too-small skull all this time
on the great assemblage
and city block of bones . . .

And today, as pine martins
and house finches peck in order
on the back porch for seeds,
I'm reminded of the PBS show
pointing out their fierce and pre-
possessing legs and beaks,
the scaled down millenniums
and slow, reconstituted architecture
of wings that brought us
to the fact that birds are about all
that remain . . .
And recently
in Tuscany, in the red limestone
in back of Gubbio, two scientists,
father and son, tracked down

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a layer of sedimentary carbon
so impacted with stardust
for the feather-thinness
of the band, that it attested to
a conflagration two million years ago:
a bright and terrible falling
from the sky that so shagged
the air with dust and cut off
light, it coldly choked
the great beasts out.
Only these
sized-down models survived,
who, once the smoke had cleared,
took to the air and trees in fear
of us and our big emerging brains,
and who, for no good reason
it seems, still sing to us
as life is taken steadily
down another notch.

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A. F. MORITZ

In the Desert

A man sits down quietly, holding his head in his hands.
The face is facing him,
and it looks into his eyes.

The two of them are not anxious to speak.
Slowly all comes clear
because their gaze is so completely clear.

And each time that it penetrates farther into the skull,
picking out the true form and all the colors
of something that had always been dark,

one of them says a single sentence
and the other one answers. Thus knowledge advances,
and the man advances through the world to the very end.

But this is wrong. The man has only one
face, one voice, one look that is pushed around by the wind.
He doesn't see himself clearly,

doesn't know what his face is like to others,
even his body is vague to him,
and he feels that he goes on and on talking,

or singing, returning a little more worn out
to the same words, as they say a lost man always
comes across his own steps, circling in the desert.

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LANCE LARSEN

February 1922: My Father's Conception

Just names chalked on someone's driveway—
Leona, Ershel—names that map the erasable walls
of the heart. Paired in loopy cursive, they
were supposed to fade, like memory, like the light
from the open doorway of the Elks' lodge after a dance,
as couples fanned out across the rutted road.

Certainly, no one was thinking of weddings.
Not Leona, not Ershel. Not the town drunk
who saluted all young lovers, with sincerity,
with a bottle, from the upriver bridge.
Not the German baker working late, who would one day
offer Ershel a life of ovens and floury hands.

Least of all their Mormon bishop, aged walrus,
snoring now beside his soft pliant wife.
And if it was after a dance, where did they end up—
Leona's basement, a barn loft? Or maybe a bunkhouse
closed for the winter, the wind and the rustling
of dusty blankets shuttering them in,

as my grandfather, sad country boxer,
clenched his eyes against this new pleasure,
fevered colors swimming through his head,
while my grandmother whispered to the wall,
if I hurry, if I hurry, if I hurry
and wash up with vinegar.

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RICHARD HORNBY

The London Theatre

THE ENGLISH THEATRE HAS BEEN SUFFERING from many of the same maladies as our own—inflation, an anti-arts government, a weak economy generally. The West End, the London equivalent of Broadway, had its worst year in decades in 1991–92. Ticket sales were down, the high British pound clobbered the American tourist market, and a record number of shows flopped. Even the latest soap operettas from Cameron Mackintosh and Trevor Nunn quickly faded to black.

But what struck me about the theatre there last summer was the tremendous underlying vitality of English acting. After a few years of the insipid American variety, you tend to forget how good theatrical acting can be, especially in historical material, where the great actor, like the great novelist, can bring the past to life for us in a leap of imagination that simultaneously offers a fresh perspective on our own times. A professorial colleague of mine was complaining, just before I left the United States, that the American theatre today offers almost nothing for him as a theatre historian; the only plays that we get to see from the past are Shakespeare's, and those usually in bizarre, updated versions. "Museum piece" is a term of scorn in the American theatre, as though museums were all stuffy, dreary places. The American actor looks only to his own personal life for inspiration, and sees history as bunk.

The British actor, by contrast, tends to find his inspiration in the role, and the world of the play. The critic Michael Billington, in his biography of the late Dame Peggy Ashcroft, wrote of her *attack*, "the capacity to tackle a role head-on, establish its physical lineaments and drive straight on to its emotional centre." All the great actors of this century, he felt, from Olivier to McKellen, have attack in abundance, and I am happy to be able to report that there is a fine generation of younger actors coming up with equal skill and commitment. This was especially notable at the great repertory companies, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre (now the Royal National Theatre, ironically at a time when the prestige of British royalty declines every day), whose splendors more than made up for the weakness of the West End.

In the summer of 1992, the RSC was in its full glory. Adrian Noble has taken over as Artistic Director from the talented but often idiosyncratic Terry Hands, and led the company to a series of superb historical productions. Without big-name stars (though some of the

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actors may become big names soon enough!), but with talented, dedicated performers, directors, and designers, the plays, some of which had not been performed professionally for centuries, sprang to life. A few years ago, the RSC opened a new, small theatre in Stratford, the Swan, dedicated to the production of plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries, and other lesser-known works from England's great theatrical past. Several of these had transferred to their Barbican Centre in London: Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1603), Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610), and Thomas Shadwell's *The Virtuoso* (1676). All showed a firm sense of their plays' historical periods, without becoming fussily archeological; a common device was to accent period costuming with occasional characters in modern dress, which provided intriguing jolts of modernity rather than forcing modern parallels throughout.

A Woman Killed with Kindness tells the story of a Yorkshire woman who is lured into adultery by a man her husband had befriended and treated generously. Catching the two lovers in bed, the pious husband declares to his wife, "I'll not martyr thee, nor mark thee for a strumpet," but resolves to kill her, literally, with kindness. She instantly apologizes, starves herself as penance, and dies in the embrace of her forgiving husband.

Heywood's style is extremely difficult for a modern actor. Time and space are compressed: Characters are seized with lust at first sight, and repent equally quickly. A scene will begin apparently outside, then shift indoors with no clear moment of entry. There is a great deal of moralizing ("Cursed be the fruits of my unchaste desire!"), and no psychology in the modern sense. Not only are the characters' objectives all on the surface, but individuals have a disarming way of bluntly announcing them, as when a man in a subplot proclaims, "She is poor. I'll therefore tempt her with this gold." But the very lack of psychology in the play strengthens the element of free will, making the ethical decisions more powerful. The more decisions are *motivated*, as in a modern play, the more they are explained away; *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*. For Heywood, however, characters make free choices and suffer the consequences, giving the play the austere moral tone of a Biblical parable.

Performed with the audience on three sides in The Pit, the small theatre in the RSC Barbican Centre, the play had a superb young cast. It is not easy to do such a stylized piece in intimate surroundings, where the audience might literally touch the performers. Nevertheless, the actors played with such simplicity and sincerity that the play's oddities seemed to become natural and inevitable. Michael Maloney perfectly caught the moral angst of the husband, while the emotional connection with his wife, played by Saskia Reeves, was utterly convincing. The actress is oddly built, short yet angular, with perfect skin and a lovely, resonant voice. Reading the play, one could easily

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imagine her death scene performed to audience guffaws, but instead it was a fervently theatrical moment.

Vicki Mortimer's design for *A Woman Killed with Kindness* used a largely bare stage, with a wooden facade at the back, and a few benches that could be shifted easily into differing configurations. The only decorative element was a tall, battered wooden cross. Katie Mitchell directed with great sensitivity and vigor, adding folk songs, rituals, and dances, which, along with the nineteenth-century rural costumes and the rough, Yorkshire accents, gave the play the feel of a Thomas Hardy novel, intense, serious, and rooted in tradition.

Mitchell also directed Solomon Anski's *The Dybbuk* in The Pit. Anski was an early twentieth-century Russian Jewish folklorist, whose play deals with Hassidic Jewish mysticism. Mitchell's production again had a strong, traditional, folk quality, but the play, although powerfully acted, did not work in the tiny space. The cast is large (one was awkwardly reminded that Jewish ceremonies require a minimum of ten men!), and there are often multiple events taking place. At one point, a young man keeled over dead, which nobody noticed, though half a dozen actors might well have stumbled over him. The RSC should have given Mitchell their main stage for such a big play.

Women directors, however, seemed to have been relegated to the basement, where Phyllida Lloyd directed another fine production, of Shadwell's *The Virtuoso*. This Restoration comedy satirizes the late seventeenth-century fashion for scientific investigation as epitomized by the newly-founded Royal Society. It introduces the hilarious character of Sir Nicholas Gimcrack, who is taking swimming lessons exclusively on dry land ("I hate the Water, I never come upon the Water, Sir"), and whose experiments in blood transfusion from a sheep to a human left the patient bleating and chewing the cud. Christopher Benjamin was a hearty, enthusiastic Sir Nicholas, heading a fine cast.

On the big main stage at the Barbican, the production of *The Alchemist* seemed drab and slow. One of the funniest plays ever written, it concerns a pair of con men who set up an alchemical laboratory, hustling suckers into subsidizing "experiments." Sam Mendes' direction seemed laissez-faire, with key lines going unpointed, and frequent dead pauses. Anthony Ward's sets and costumes were colorless and shabby, even though the play is set in a house in the fashionable Blackfriars district, and the con men have been making money hand over fist. David Bradley and Jonathan Hyde were respectable as the title character and his protean assistant, however, and the rest of the cast gave strong support.

By contrast, *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by David Leveaux, had beautiful designs, but less than satisfactory acting. Alison Chitty's settings used just bare gray walls surrounding a steeply raked gray stage, but her rich, soft, colorful costumes, Alan Burrett's magnificent lighting, and Leveaux's carefully arranged stage groupings made this

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a highly pictorial production. The lighting was the most glorious I have ever seen; the Barbican Theatre, with its extremely high ceiling and deep stage, enabled this, but it still takes an artist to exploit its possibilities; Burrett used beams of light like brush strokes. The cast were beautifully spoken, but Clare Holman was a bland-looking Juliet, while Michael Maloney was an intense but rather senior Romeo. There was genuine emotion in both performances, but little sexual attraction; they seemed not so much lovers as terrified conspirators.

The culmination of the summer season at the Barbican was a marathon production of the Oedipus plays of Sophocles, directed by Adrian Noble himself. It was certainly the best production of Greek tragedy I have ever seen for vigor and clarity. The acting of the principals was superb, while the choral odes, which in most modern productions are usually a signal to go out and buy popcorn, were actually a highlight; I was even sorry when they were over.

Oedipus Tyrannos, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* are not a trilogy. They tell the story of Oedipus' discovery that he has killed his own father and married his own mother, his self-blinding and exile from Thebes, his ultimate redemption, and the civil war after his death, but Sophocles wrote the plays out of chronological order over a forty year period. Nor is the story always treated the same way; in *Antigone*, for example, which was written first but is last in the chronology, Ismene says that her father Oedipus "died hated, in shame shunned," but in *Oedipus at Colonus* Theseus, king of Athens, receives the blind exile with honor and makes him a citizen, who then dies in an apparent apotheosis.

Thus, the three plays are rarely performed together. Nevertheless, doing so gives them a dramatic momentum, with the interrelated characters and themes gaining resonance as we experience them over and over, but from differing viewpoints. Feuds between close relatives, the connections between family and politics, divided loyalties, the impact of past crimes on the present, and the great overriding motif of *recognition*, a sudden awareness that one has done wrong despite trying to do right, are significant elements that continuously fascinate.

The three principal male roles of Oedipus, Theseus, and Creon were played by Gerard Murphy, Philip Voss, and John Shrapnel, all short, stocky, muscular, middle-aged men; far from seeming wispy or aesthetically "tragic," they looked like three fireplugs. When Shrapnel, who is far from young, had to carry in the body of Creon's dead son Haemon (played by Paul Kiernan, no lightweight either), he did it robustly, at times using only one arm! But the actors' speech was even more impressive than their looks. The great teacher of voice for the actor, Cicely Berry, taught at the RSC for years; her work has been taken over by Andrew Wade, and, for this production, Barbara Houseman. Berry's approach sees voice as central to stage acting;

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stressing far more than just audibility, she treats the human voice as an expressive instrument. The result here was not only that the actors could be heard everywhere in the auditorium, nor that every word was as distinct as a gunshot, but that the range of variation in pitch, volume, and emotional coloring was extraordinary. American actors speak badly because they look upon vocal work as mere polish, an external, when in fact it is acting itself.

Choral work is the ultimate test of vocal acting. In my own directing, I have never dared to tackle Greek drama, because unlike, say, opera or musical comedy, it requires that the chorus be *understood*, rather than just sound nice. To get a dozen people to speak or sing in unison so that you can distinguish the words is hard enough in itself. The RSC choruses not only achieved this, they also managed to convey ideas and emotions, because the chorus in Greek tragedy is not only a commentator on the action but a participant in it. Part of the success was the result of having some of the lines spoken by individual chorus members, but many were spoken, and a few sung, in unison. Ilona Sekacz composed delicate, subtle music that played under the odes and some of the episodes as well. Movement Director Sue Lefton provided the chorus with simple, vigorous dances whose syncopated clogging sounds added to the musical effects.

Timberlake Wertenbaker did the translations, which I found a bit prosy; she is also too fond of the word *hubris*, which is not found in the original, and which meant something different to the Greeks than it does to us. Designs, by "Ultz," were simplified and stylized. The costumes, especially the pajama-like tunics on the principal men, worked well, but the intentionally artificial beards on the chorus of old men looked a bit silly, while the use of big round balloons floating over the audience to stand for the gods recalled Macy's parade. Nevertheless, this was a landmark production, worth a trip to London on its own to see.

I found the Royal National Theatre productions less impressive than those at the RSC. For many years, there was a saying among British actors that the National was an actors' theatre, while the RSC was a directors' theatre, i.e., a theatre where acting and text were often sacrificed to a director's ponderous, eccentric concept. This may be turning around. The National, like the RSC, has had a change of administration, with Richard Eyre taking over as Artistic Director. Under his aegis, the French Canadian Robert Lepage directed the heaviest, stupidest, ugliest, dirtiest (literally), most boring production of Shakespeare I have ever seen.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a script that invites "concept" directing, especially since Peter Brook's famous 1970 version done on trapezes, but at least Brook had some sense of the dynamics of the play and the nature of its world. Lepage seemed to think that the world of the play was the Okefenokee Swamp. His setting, designed

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by Michael Levine, consisted of a large, shallow, round pool of water surrounded by piles of mud, all garishly lit by bare electric bulbs. The actors, many dressed in white, sloshed around in this filth (think of the laundry bills!), which had nothing to do with what they were saying or doing. There was no contrast between the court and the forest, or between the world of the fairies and the human world, only muck, slime, and sludge everywhere. Director Lepage probably conceived this production long before he had read or thought of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, plugging it in at the first opportunity; it would have been the same for *Lear* or *Hamlet* or *Little Mary Sunshine*. Sadly, there were many talented young people in the cast; imagine getting your first opportunity to perform at the National Theatre and finding yourself literally stuck in the mud.

The other productions at National were considerably better. (It would have been hard to be worse!) Eileen Atkins gave a precise, sensitive, delicate performance in Tennessee Williams' *Night of the Iguana*. The play is full of bizarre, offbeat elements, but Director Richard Eyre caught the poetic tone, while Atkins made her strange character, a spinster artist from Nantucket traveling through Mexico with her ninety-seven-year-old poet grandfather, seem natural and focussed. Frances Barber, however, was tense and strident in the role of a sexy, middle-aged innkeeper, with a horrible southern American accent. (Atkins sounded impeccably New England.) Alfred Molina was better, as a minister defrocked for his sexual foibles, but his performance palled by comparison with Richard Burton in the film version of the play; Molina certainly seemed irritated by the frustrations of running a seedy bus tour, but Burton got the inner, spiritual torment of the man as well.

Alan Bennett's amusing, intelligent new play, *The Madness of George III*, performed at the National's Lyttelton Theatre, is not only historical but political. George III is generally known to us Americans as a stubborn autocrat, but in fact he was a conscientious ruler who was quite enlightened for his time. Bennett sets his play in 1788–89, as George was beginning to feel the effects of porphyria, a rare metabolic disorder that brought on fits of madness and eventually killed him. In satirical scenes worthy of Molière, the King's doctors poke him and prod him and examine his excrement, fighting over differing treatments; even the most enlightened physician shackles the poor monarch and scolds him like an infant. The pathos of the King could become maudlin, but Bennett counterpoints it with political issues: The Pitt faction in Parliament needs the King cured, for only with his support can they sustain a majority; the faction of Fox and the Prince of Wales (who later became Regent) wants the King dead, or at least declared incompetent.

Nigel Hawthorne, known to New York audiences for his superb performance as C. S. Lewis in William Nicholson's *Shadowlands* in 1990–91, was equally strong as "Farmer George," the upright ruler

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dedicated to agricultural improvement, in contrast to his loutish son, hilariously played by plump Michael Fitzgerald, who is dedicated to fashion and pleasure. In both play and production there was a strong sense of *history*. Mark Thompson's sets and costumes, and Paul Pyant's superb lighting, gave the effect of eighteenth-century painting, while in the writing and performances there was a feel for the contrasting sordidness and smugness of the age of enlightenment, the elegance and omnipresent corruption, the scientific progress and incredible backwardness, the idealism and the cynicism. As always, a genuine sense of history led to effective modern parallels, about the abuses of science, the chicanery of politicians, and the sad condition of the British monarchy. "To be heir to the throne is not a position," cries the Prince of Wales, in a line his current counterpart might echo, "it is a predicament."

The best production at National last summer was the most elegant version in history of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, starring Alan Howard as Higgins. Howard, little known in the United States because he rarely acts in films and has hardly acted at all in recent years, is the best British stage actor of his generation—better even than Ian McKellen, who is no slouch. Howard's performances back in the seventies and early eighties as Henry V, Richard II and III, and Rover in John O'Keefe's 1798 comedy *Wild Oats*, were without equal. Nephew of the film actor Leslie Howard, he combines the charm of a movie star with the attack of a great stage actor. His voice is resonant and flexible; where McKellen sometimes appears to be straining, Howard gives the impression of a finely tuned engine with vastly more power than it needs.

As Higgins, Howard lounged about the stage, dominating the furniture, barking out the lines in a manner that recalled his Richard III. I spoke with him afterwards about my admiration for his incorporating the nasty side of Higgins; most stars (e.g., Rex Harrison), afraid ever to seem less than glamorous, prettify the character. Howard spoke with relish of "the monster Shaw has written," and noted the many times in the script that the character is described as a child. He felt that the key was playing Higgins as child*like*, as opposed to child*ish*; he has all the innocence and charm of a child, but also the willfulness and petulance. He felt that Higgins, oddly, shares this quality with Eliza, though at the end she is moving toward gentility, which he despises.

Frances Barber as Eliza again had accent problems, and at times seemed too weepy, but there was a nice sexual electricity between her and Howard. It is important that Eliza find Higgins attractive; at the end, like Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll House*[1] (which Shaw wrote about and

[1] Rolf Fjelde, the leading American Ibsen translator, insists that this title should *not* have the possessive; see his introduction to the New American Library edition.

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greatly admired), she realizes that marriage has to be based on more than sexual attraction, and chooses Freddy instead.

The rest of the cast, including the marvelous Michael Bryant as Doolittle, gave strong performances. Howard Davies' direction and William Dudley's designs made the piece rather too opulent for me. Davies used Shaw's film script, which adds a number of scenes (including the grand Embassy reception where Eliza fools everybody into thinking she is a duchess), thus losing the tight plotting of the original. Scene changes involved an elaborate revolving stage, which broke down the night I saw it, slowing the action even more. Dudley's costumes were magnificent, but at times inappropriate; at one point, Higgins wore a flowered waistcoat, though Shaw makes it clear that he usually dresses austerely, in contrast to his pre-Raphaelite mother. The Eynsford Hills were lavishly dressed, though they live in unfashionable Earl's Court, and Freddy is described as penniless. Nevertheless, these are quibbles only a Shaw scholar might make; it was a splendid production, another example of the great English repertory companies' ability to produce historical drama with vigor and imagination.

TO OUR READERS

A new book by a Contributing Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW has recently been published. In accordance with our policy, the book will not be reviewed in these pages, but is listed below for the interest of our readers:

RICHARD HORNBY: *The End of Acting: A Radical View.* Applause Books. $21.95.

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ROBERT S. CLARK

Music Chronicle

HARD TIMES, IT IS SAID, bring with them a hankering for the simple pleasures of a bygone era. Can that account for New York's quickening interest in the past year or two in the classics of the American musical stage? From the revamped *Crazy for You* (née *Girl Crazy*) of George and Ira Gershwin, which had its debut in 1930, to Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls* and *The Most Happy Fella* of the early fifties, the present appetite for revivals and adaptations of the sometimes ingenuous but always diverting entertainments of these and the intervening decades seems unabated: *Guys and Dolls* is currently selling tickets for the later months of 1993, long after the Administration incumbent as I write has assured us, on one of several occasions, that our economic gloom will have dispersed. The phenomenon does not stop at Broadway, moreover: in the clubs around New York in recent weeks, performers have devoted evenings to Irving Berlin, and a one-woman show recalls songs associated with the career of Ethel Merman. In Washington, the Arena Stage has just mounted the Gershwins' *Of Thee I Sing*, which won the 1931 Pulitzer Prize.

The musical plays of Gershwin, Berlin, Loesser, Cole Porter and Richard Rodgers are never far from the American consciousness, of course. Their numbers are the staple of the older generation of nightclub performers, are regularly heard on the radio, and are the subject of occasional public-television tributes and stagings by such venturesome institutions as the Houston Grand Opera, whose production of Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein's *Show Boat* in 1983, enhanced by the original Robert Russell Bennett orchestrations and the scholarship of John McGlinn, set a standard for probity in such undertakings. Yet it was not this example, but rather Lincoln Center's long-running revival-adaptation of Porter's *Anything Goes* in the late eighties, that foreshadowed today's surge of interest, its box-office success suggesting that, with the right surgery applied to music and book and the right combination of performers and production values, such museum pieces could spring to profitable life.

The recent *Anything Goes* was not much like the original incarnation: to divert attention from its anemic shipboard-romance story, the producers imported a handful of Porter's most popular tunes from other shows. It is likewise with *Crazy for You*, the past season's most sought-after ticket except for *Guys and Dolls*, the theatrical integrity of

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which was rightly judged able to survive the cauldron of Broadway in the nineties without tampering.

Crazy for You is a Strasbourg goose of a theatrical evening, brimming with such Gershwin classics as "Bidin' My Time," "But Not for Me," "Embraceable You" and "I Got Rhythm," which were heard in *Girl Crazy*, and "Shall We Dance?," "Someone to Watch Over Me" and "They Can't Take That Away from Me," which were not. Between its rather manic dance numbers, and the elaborate solo turns for the principals, the lamebrained book, having to do with a Manhattan ne'er-do-well who inherits a theater in a Nevada hick town, serves as tenuous support for stock situations and shameless one-liners. (Sample: malcontent fiancée to prospective mother-in-law, who has ordered her son to go West to investigate the theater, "He'll go to Deadrock over my dead body." Mother-in-law's retort: "That sounds like an excellent route to me.") In fairness to *Girl Crazy*'s authors, I should point out that the program credits Ken Ludwig with the current book, "inspired by material by Guy Bolton and John McGowan."

The Gershwin brothers' memorable melodies and refined lyrics are, needless to say, the bright spots of the evening. But next to their obscured brilliance, *Jelly's Last Jam* is a beacon. Like *Crazy for You*, it starts with some fine American music, in this case the work of the New Orleans-born jazz bandleader, pianist and composer Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton. But the resemblance ends there. Those responsible for *Jelly* have used considerable imagination in fashioning fresh and effective theater out of their borrowed material.

By all accounts "Jelly Roll" Morton (1890–1941) was a seminal figure in the evolution of jazz, hastening its development from the ragtime and blues of the century's first decade into the full-fledged style of the twenties brilliantly mined by King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson and others. In his definitive study *Early Jazz*,[1] Gunther Schuller calls Morton "the first of that precious jazz elite: composer." His own numbers, Schuller continues, were:

> original multithematic structures which embodied (like most ragtime) a definite, detailed compositional conception, which had to be retained in performance. . . . His best arrangements were not mere orchestrations, but carefully organized structures, in which all the details of instrumentation, of timbral relationship, of rhythms and harmonic counterpoint were realized as integral compositional elements.[2]

[1] Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz* (New York, 1968, 1986).
[2] Schuller, pp. 135–6.

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No one was more convinced of his importance than Morton himself. By the time he made a series of self-serving autobiographical recordings for the Library of Congress in 1938, he had long since become fond of describing himself as the "inventor of jazz." Proud of his Creole origins, his early traditional musical training, and his youthful visits with his family to New Orleans' French opera house, he was contemptuous of the unlettered and instinctive playing of the "black Negroes" he found himself surrounded with as jazz gathered strength and respectability at every level of American society. Again Schuller sums it up:

> His unequivocal prejudices against the black Uptown Negroes and their music were responsible for both Morton's most successful achievements and his ultimate decline as a force in jazz. For Morton's uncompromising pride in the music he stood for (and indeed claimed to have originated) led him to create the finest recorded tribute to New Orleans music ever achieved. But it also induced the stubborn arrogance of his later years, which kept him from realizing that New Orleans music and his own innovations, now thirty-five years old, had long been superseded.[3]

The creators of *Jelly's Last Jam*—chief among them George C. Wolfe, who devised the book, Susan Birkenhead, who wrote the lyrics, and Luther Henderson, who adapted Morton's music and supplied additional music himself—have taken the abstractions and ironies described above and clothed them in striking dramatic garb. At the moment of his death Morton (Gregory Hines) is called to account by the Chimney Man, an African shaman equivalent of St. Peter. He is accused of bigotry, selfishness and disdain for others, and his life is displayed as evidence. Subsequent scenes follow Morton from his Creole childhood through his youthful apprentice days in Storyville, New Orleans' notorious red-light district—where he learns more than music—to success, with his Red Hot Peppers Band in Chicago and New York, a long-simmering but finally aborted love affair, and ultimate eclipse as the jazz style of the twenties gives way to the swing era of the thirties. Coming to terms with all that made him, Morton avows his own shortcomings and the communal roots of jazz, and the Chimney Man permits him to enter paradise.

Each of the show's scenes is built around one or more of Morton's instrumentals, as supplemented by Henderson (and in one instance King Oliver). The lyrics, designed to throw the dramatic situations into sharp relief, sometimes flirt with doggerel, but do stay clear of excessive artiness. It will come as no surprise, Gregory Hines being first a dancer and then an actor, that tap dancing is a prominent

[3] Schuller, p. 138.

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feature of the show. But only someone allergic to it could fail to admire Hines's grace and skill (he is responsible, with Ted L. Levy, for the tap choreography, too), not to mention that of Savion Glover, who plays the young Jelly with abundant charm and joins Hines in some irresistible tap duos.

The show has its weaknesses. The book, for all its gritty strength, lapses into occasional cliché: Jelly's coldness is laid to his unloving upbringing, and the farcical treatment of New York gangsters clashes with the mordant context. In a few critical scenes Hines's unemphatic acting style does not mesh well with Tonya Pinkins' highly inflected delivery, robbing the lovers' encounters of some of their dramatic tension. But most of the time both book and lyrics find a language and a pulse that create theatrical vigor, and Henderson's arrangements of some of Morton's best pieces, "King Porter Stomp" and "Jungle Blues" among them, are admirable.

On the third page of Laurence Bergreen's biography of Irving Berlin, *As Thousands Cheer*,[4] the reader learns, among much else, that as the five-year-old Russian immigrant disembarked with his family at Ellis Island in 1893 "his forehead bore the scar left by a pen knife that had fallen on him during the voyage." Why record this? Did the wound grow infected and blight the child's early weeks in New York? Was he disfigured for life? No: it turns out, like so much else herein, to have absolutely no significance at all.

It is not a good omen for the reader. This is a leviathan of a book, belching detail both relevant and irrelevant, crowded with people, rife with incident, peppered with testimony—not all of it apt—to every aspect of its subject's life, times and character. Worse, it indulges on far too many pages in the hypothetical ascription of thoughts, emotions, motivations and plans to Berlin and those associated with him over the century-long span of his life. But if you can bear with these *longueurs*, there is a great deal here that instructs and delights.

Berlin's career stretched from the early nineteen-hundreds, when he mastered the emerging ragtime style and made it the object of acclaim and imitation with "Alexander's Ragtime Band" (1911), to the 1960s, when his final attempt to re-establish a beachhead on the Broadway stage with *Mr. President* failed dismally. Bergreen's lavish hand spreads these decades before the reader, with stops along the way to relish the twists and turns of a colorful life in music: the early years as a song-plugger and publisher on New York's Lower East Side, the success of his songs in Broadway revues and the building of the Music Box Theater, his marriage to the socialite Ellin Mackay over the implacable opposition of her father, the rise to Broadway's summit with *Face the Music* (1932) and *As Thousands Cheer* (1933), the

[4] AS THOUSANDS CHEER, by *Laurence Bergreen*. Viking Penguin. $15.95p.

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years in Hollywood and the war years, the faltering career fitfully revived by *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), *Call Me Madam* (1950) and the film *White Christmas* (1953), and the last years' bittersweet mix of failure and decline with popular adulation, television celebrations and White House citations.

Bergreen's research is exhaustive and his sense of narrative progress sure. Best of all, his dramatis personae could not be improved upon: the book offers vignettes of Vernon and Irene Castle, Florenz Ziegfeld, Marilyn Miller, Alexander Woollcott, Moss Hart, Ethel Merman, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Judy Garland, Ethel Waters, Fred Astaire, Cole Porter, Robert E. Sherwood and a host of less well-known but equally fascinating men and women.

Finally, Bergreen's story is a microcosm of the infancy, growth and maturation of the American musical comedy. He identifies *Show Boat* (1927) as a watershed: with its musical numbers cannily integrated into a coherent and provocative book, it set the course of development for the genre that would ultimately lead to *Oklahoma!* (1943), *Carousel* (1945), *South Pacific* (1949) and *Guys and Dolls* (1950). It was a development that Berlin, for all his talent and shrewdness, could bring little to. Bergreen puts it this way:

> His range of knowledge was that of the autodidact, exceedingly deep and narrow, confined to his songs and how to sell them. The world of ideas and theories held no allure for him; he was a tinkerer, a pragmatist, an inspired amateur.[5]

Yet the author does not underrate Berlin's gifts: he knows that the composer of "Always," "God Bless America," "Easter Parade," "Cheek to Cheek," "Heat Wave" and so many more is not someone to condescend to. In one of his rare forays into analysis of the work, with "Blue Skies," Bergreen gets to the point:

> As with the best of Berlin's efforts, this deceptively simple expression of happiness drew strength from concealed paradox and subtlety.[6]

And he offers this telling glimpse into Berlin's awareness of his best instincts, as recounted by Anita Loos:

> "He would go over and over a lyric until it seemed perfect to my ears. Then he'd scrap the whole thing and begin over again. When I asked Irving what was wrong, he invariably said, 'It isn't *simple* enough.' "[7]

Bergreen clearly finds his subject an unpleasant man. He cites instance after instance of Berlin's acquisitiveness, near-obsessive inse-

[5] Bergreen, p. 283.
[6] Bergreen, p. 277.
[7] Bergreen, p. 142.

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curity, wavering loyalty to many who served him well, abusive treatment of some who crossed him—or even simply pointed out inconvenient truths—and intense, driven self-absorption. Yet the finished portrait is not one-sided; as frequently as he reviled and disappointed them, Berlin also treated his associates with kindness and generosity, and particularly for friendships of long standing, went out of his way to help in times of trouble.

Bergreen is also good on the moving story of *This Is the Army*, the travelling anthology of Berlin songs that began on July 4, 1942, on Broadway largely as a result of the composer's tireless determination. After its seven-month run and national tour, all the proceeds of which went to Army Emergency Relief at Berlin's insistence, the soldier-cast journeyed to Hollywood to make a film version. Then, for the next two years and more, the show toured Europe, North Africa and the Pacific, playing before an estimated two and a half million soldiers and civilians. Except for brief intervals spent in the States with his family, Berlin, now in his early fifties, accompanied the show and managed its affairs, sharing the hardships as one with his men, and regularly performing "Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning," which he had written during World War I. It was the composer's extraordinary way of repaying the debt he felt he owed his adopted country. Bergreen is surely on safe ground when he comments, "No other songwriter of Berlin's stature would have attempted to lead his own military troupe around the world."[8]

The thumping 658-page Penguin paperback is attractively designed and durable, with a readable typeface and two well-printed inserts of photographs on a glossy stock of good weight. More's the pity then that it is so poorly edited. This is a book that cannot make up its mind whether persons of color are "blacks" or "Blacks," whether a show's title is *No Siree* or *No Sirree* (on the same page), whether the writer's name is Alexander Wollcott or Woollcott (in the same paragraph, mind you!); that talks of being "flanked on either side," of ASCAP's "board of members," of a visit that is "*de rigeur*," of having to "wile away" long nights, of Berlin's star "in the ascent," of a barrier being "breeched," and so on—and on. The publisher owed Bergreen's sturdy and panoramic if flawed effort better than this.

It is a distinct pleasure to turn from these symptoms of deteriorating standards to the stylish, literate and beautifully produced booklet that accompanies *You're the Top: Cole Porter in the 1930s.*[9] This compilation of 69 recordings of songs Porter wrote in the thirties, a

[8] Bergreen, p. 437.

[9] YOU'RE THE TOP: Cole Porter in the 1930s, produced by *Susan Elliott, Richard D. Sudhalter*, and *Robert Kimball*. Indiana Historical Society. Three compact discs $49.95, 3 cassettes $42.95, plus $2.75 postage and handling; check or money order payable to Indiana Historical Society; mail to Porter Album, Indiana Historical Society, 315 W. Ohio, Indianapolis, Indiana 46202.

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cooperative venture of the Indiana Historical Society—Porter was born in Peru, Indiana—and Yale University's Historical Sound Recordings Collection, where most of the recordings are housed, is issued to mark the centennial of the composer's birth in 1891. Susan Elliott, one of the set's three producers, shares credit with Paula Corpuz of the Society for the booklet's excellent presentation and careful editing. Of the other two producers, Richard D. Sudhalter contributes valuable material on the songs and the shows they were part of, along with a few words on each of the leading performers, and Robert Kimball supplies a laconic, keenly observed biographical brief on the composer.

Together the three chose the contents, and of course the hard decisions were not what to include but what to omit. (See their amusing collective note on the difficulties and ambiguities of the selection process.) There is no quarreling with tastes, I agree, but the paucity of quibbles the choices aroused in this Porter devotee speaks well of the producers to me, at least. In listening to the three hours and more of music these discs hold, I counted on the fingers of one hand the times I questioned an inclusion.

The producers wisely chose to keep the mono originals mono and the stereo stereo, and have matched differing levels well. The booklet contains full discographic information and a wealth of photographs of Porter, his friends and associates and the set's performing artists. The producers acknowledge the "serious omission" of Frank Sinatra, whose recordings they could not obtain permission to use. But the absence counts for little against what they give us.

The predictable touchstones are here: Porter's own recordings of the thirties, Mary Martin singing "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," Ethel Merman exhorting the angel to "Blow, Gabriel, Blow," Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters crooning "Don't Fence Me In," and Judy Garland and Johnny Mercer harmonizing on "Friendship." Among other vocalists are Ella Fitzgerald, Mabel Mercer, Libby Holman, Ethel Waters, Fred Astaire, Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong: instrumental contributions come from Xavier Cugat ("Begin the Beguine"), Benny Goodman, Ruby Braff, Ellis Larkins, Art Tatum and Bill Evans.

Several cuts I heard for the first time quickly took their place on my short list of favorites: Lena Horne's wry and spunky "At Long Last Love" and the English vocalist Al Bowlly's suave "In the Still of the Night" are two. The third is one of the two renditions here of "Just One of Those Things." If perfection is approached by way of elegance, economy and balance, then "Just One of Those Things" is as close to perfect as art comes: not a word, not a note too many, and word and note wedded inseparably. So I had never heard a purely instrumental version without regretting the absence of the lyric—until I heard the inspired treatment by Bud Freeman, Bob Wilber and their companions here.

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The collection has its hilarious moments, too, not all of them intentional. If you can sit through Tony Martin's "Begin the Beguine" without laughing, you are more phlegmatic than I am. Sudhalter's notes recall the beguine blowout of the late thirties and early forties, when Artie Shaw's hit recording (also heard here) and its successors made the song and the dance all but ubiquitous. The international mania stirred a reaction, tartly distilled by Noël Coward:

> She declined to begin the beguine
> Though they besought her to
> And in language profane and obscene
> She cursed the man who taught her to.
> She cursed Cole Porter too.

The thirties, that "low, dishonest decade," as Auden called it, had more than its share of tragedy and turmoil. But its good fortune encompassed the very different Berlin and Porter, whose art nonetheless shared a wit, urbanity, naturalness of expression and universality of appeal that, given the steady coarsening and balkanization of American culture, we shall never see the like of again.

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BERT CARDULLO

Ethics and Aesthetics

THE WORK OF THE LATE Satyajit Ray (1921–1992) has been called Chekhovian, and it is to the extent that, with apparent artlessness and within seemingly quiet microcosms that cut across the various social classes of this director's native Bengal, it dramatizes the clash between the India of old and the new India beset by political, economic, and cultural change. Like Chekhov, Ray refuses to take sides either with characters or ideologies; since he is interested above all in the complexly human in such films as *The Music Room* (1958) and *The Chess Players* (1977), there are no real heroes or villains in his work, no simple winners and losers. But unlike Chekhov and like the neorealist purist Zavattini, Ray is also concerned with the undramatic in life, with the documenting of life's everyday currents for their own pleasurable sake. And it is the tension in his films—most notably in the famous Apu trilogy (1955–1959)—between this will to witness undifferentiated dailiness with reverential wonder and the countervailing determination to create dramatic order or "meaning" out of shapelessness, which gives them their distinction.

That distinction is not entirely lost in his last films, but it becomes blurred by the intrusion of explicitly ethical questions into the realm of the aesthetic, of ethical imperiousness on aesthetic richness. As Irving Howe has pointed out,[1] and to continue the Russian connection, the same "intrusion" occurs in the late Tolstoy, who speculated in 1897 on the relationship between art and morality:

> The aesthetic and the ethical are two arms of one lever: to the extent to which one side becomes longer and heavier, the other side becomes shorter and lighter. As soon as a man loses his moral sense, he becomes particularly responsive to the aesthetic.

In 1984, during the making of *The Home and the World*, Satyajit Ray had two heart attacks and stopped making films for five years. He returned in 1989 with an adaptation of *An Enemy of the People* (Ibsen's most overtly ethical, and therefore least implicative, play), then followed with *Branches of the Tree* in 1990, about the moral spectrum encompassed by three sons who gather around their seventy-year-old

[1] Irving Howe, "The Old Magician: A Defense of the Late, Scolding Tolstoy," *The New Republic*, 27 April 1992, pp. 30–34.

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father after he has been struck down by a heart attack. In 1991 Ray made his last film, *The Stranger*, which I propose to discuss here.

The plot of *The Stranger* is simple and familiar as well as familial: the introduction of an outsider, a mysterious element, into an otherwise intimate, tranquil setting and the recording of what follows. One day, a letter arrives at the servant-attended home in Calcutta of Sudhindra Bose, a business executive. The letter is for his wife, Anila, and comes from her long-lost maternal uncle, Manomohan Mitra, who left India in 1955 and hasn't been heard from since 1968. The unmarried Manomohan is an anthropologist who has traveled widely, including long trips to the western United States and the jungles of South America; he departed his native country out of wanderlust and has returned, he says, out of a desire to spend a week with his niece, his only living relative, in the city of his birth. Traditional Indian hospitality demands that Anila receive her uncle, even though she hasn't seen him since she was two years old, but her husband objects to the visit on the grounds that the letter-writer may be an impostor out to borrow money or steal their valuable antique bronzes. Quietly, Anila prevails, much to the delight of her young son, Satyaki, who exclaims, "Just think, a fake great uncle!", and Manomohan shows up sooner than expected from New Delhi.

Manomohan Mitra has arrived during the Durga Festival in celebration of Lord Krishna and, although Ray wisely does not overemphasize the point, it is clear by the end of *The Stranger* that we are to see him as a mystical visitant in human guise (much like some of the figures in Tolstoy's late fiction), just as Krishna himself was the incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. After apologizing for the inconvenience and uncertainty he is causing the family, Manomohan placidly proceeds to charm and even transfix the Boses, especially Satyaki, to whom he tells stories of his foreign travels, explains the difference between lunar and solar eclipses as well as the provenance of mountain ranges, and teaches a deep respect for the past together with a healthy skepticism toward the present. The boy (whose name suggests that it is his perspective with which Ray identifies) becomes thoroughly convinced that this man is his true great uncle, as does his mother, particularly since Manomohan likes to sing—something he has in common with her own mother. Anila *wants* to believe that the stranger is her uncle, wants to love and honor him. But her husband remains skeptical despite the fact that Manomohan produces a passport as identification. The passport could be forged, Sudhindra reasons, so he arranges for some friends to assess the visitor to the Bose household.

Ranjan Rakshit, an actor, and his wife come over first and "take in" Manomohan during an evening of meandering conversation mixed with pregnant silence, in the course of which two speakers rise to speak at length—the actor and the stranger. At the end of this evening, getting ready for bed, Sudhindra concludes that, phony

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uncle or not, his guest has in fact journeyed to Calcutta to collect a portion of the Mitra family inheritance, which is being held in escrow and would otherwise go in its entirety to Anila, but to which the rightful uncle is legally entitled even though he has been living abroad for so many years. The next night Prithwish SenGupta, a journalist, visits the Boses and rudely cross-examines the poised, unflappable Manomohan about his finances and his profession, despite the latter's desire to concentrate on such subjects as organized religion and the caste system or science and technology. Prithwish ends his interrogation with the words, "Either come clean about why you're here or clear out," and in the morning the "leech," as the journalist has labeled him, disappears.

Manomohan goes straight to the country home of the executor of the Mitra estate, where he gets his money—over half a million rupees—then visits the nearby village of the Santals, a tribe descended from the earliest inhabitants of India and the first natives to rise up in rebellion against the British. At Anila's urging, the Boses track him there, not to contest the executor's decision to grant him a share of the will, but rather to apologize for doubting his veracity and take him back to Calcutta. Before they depart, however, Manomohan and the Bose family attend a Santal dance festival, where Anila is moved to join the tribal women who dance to the drumbeat of their men. As the stranger watches, he turns the tables on her by declaring, "I have often doubted whether she is really my niece—but not any more." Not any more, because Anila has validated her membership in the musically talented Mitra family with her dancing as well as with her singing and sitar-playing during the evening of Prithwish's visit.

I persist in calling Manomohan the stranger here, and not Anila's uncle, because he is never conclusively proved to be that uncle, as he would have been in a conventional narrative. Indeed, such a story would consume itself with the verification of his identity, whereas Ray's narrative—he wrote the screenplay in addition to the score, as he did for many of his films—concentrates more on Manomohan's character and its effect on the Boses, together with their effect on him. In both cases, that effect is beneficent: Anila and, more important, Sudhindra are ready to embrace the gentle and learned Manomohan, despite his pursuit of what they regard as their legacy; while the stranger, for his part, is moved by their loving, conciliatory gesture to turn over to Anila his allotment of the family inheritance, which he does in the same way that he announced his visit to her home—by letter. Before departing Calcutta, Manomohan leaves an envelope with Anila that, as he requests, she opens only after he is gone. Inside is a check for his portion of the money, plus a prefatory poem. The stranger is on his way to Australia for further anthropological study, saying that he will live for the time being off his advance from an American publisher for his recently completed book, titled *An Indian among Indians.*

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The Stranger has been called a parable of greed and mistrust in contemporary life that in the end exhibits Satyajit Ray's enduring love of and confidence in humanity's power for good. But to agree with this analysis, as I do, is at the same time to assess the film as lesser Ray, precisely because in it he directs both as an artist and as a rhetorician, wanting simultaneously to create a work of art and convert viewers to a moral position. What betrays him, in addition to his tendentious tale, is his habit of moving the camera toward a character for rhetorical effect, as when Sudhindra suspects his visitor, whom he nonetheless finds likable, of plotting to get a share of the Mitra family inheritance; his ending *The Stranger* with that most tendentious of devices, the freeze frame; and his neglect of purely filmic artistry for ethical proselytizing, as evidenced by Barun Raha's undistinguished color cinematography.

What tips Ray's moralistic hand above all, however, is his underlining his parable of greed and mistrust by making the stranger an anthropologist whose specialty is the study of "primitive" cultures. (He has lived for extended periods of time with Amazonian tribes as well as with American Indians.) That is, Manomohan sings the praises of "primitive" culture, arguing for its superiority to a "civilized" society that, along with its many comforts, has given us nuclear weapons, addictive drugs, and homelessness—plus the greed, mistrust, and lack of spirituality that are bred by competitive (i.e., mercantile) urban societies. Indeed, this visitor to Calcutta goes so far as to say, "It's my greatest regret that I'm not a savage," during his cross-examination by Prithwish, who predictably extols big-city life as progressive and energizing. So Manomohan's turning over to Anila his share of the Mitra family legacy can be seen as his rejection of the money culture (the big-money culture, in any event) after a brief flirtation with it, and his leaving for Australia can be viewed as his attempt to unite once again with the aboriginal or atavistic essence of mankind. In his native country, this essence is represented by the Santal tribe, his visit to whom seems partly to have inspired his decision both to give up his financial inheritance and to resume his anthropological quest.

That quest after ancient origins was, of course, also the quest of Lévi-Strauss, and Ray has said that he got the idea for *The Stranger* from reading two books by the French ethnologist. But it is one thing to argue, as Lévi-Strauss does, that the structural analysis of disparate cultural systems can lead to the discovery of universal principles governing the mind of man, "primitive" or "civilized," and another thing to translate this argument—as both Lévi-Strauss and Ray do—into both an indictment against the hegemony of Western civilization and a paean to the pristine grace of the primitive.[2] As

[2] It is thus no accident that English is interspersed with Bengali throughout *The*

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persistently seductive as is the performance of Utpal Dutt in the role of Manomohan, I resist this character's, and his film's, ingenuous championing of the savage state, preferring to regard it as the wishful thinking of a world-weary traveler rather than as the cogent judgment of a wise old man.

Throughout a career that produced more than thirty films over nearly four decades, and that made him the first of his countrymen to create a uniquely Indian cinematic style,[3] Satyajit Ray has been criticized for the absence of "political commitment" from his work, which means commitment to leftist ideology. Well, in his final film he regrettably gives us commitment of the politically-correct kind, to the idea that the primitive, the unsophisticated, the simple is saintly, especially when it is practiced by "people of color." Ray may have been able during his long career to resist offers from Hollywood and elsewhere in the West, but in *The Stranger* he was unable to resist a Western-born notion of human existence that in its smugness and naïveté is worthy of Hollywood at its intellectual worst.

In *Uranus*, Claude Berri also gives us commitment, but of a distinctly apolitical kind: to the idea that no man has the right to judge another; specifically, that witch hunting by Communist militants in France immediately after World War II was no better than the persecution of those same Communists during the war by French citizens who fervently collaborated with their Nazi conquerors, and hardly morally superior to the behavior of those who survived by learning simply to coexist with the German Occupation. Yes, this is the same Berri who once gave us such cozy confections as *The Two of Us* (1966), *Le Sex Shop* (1972), and *The Male of the Century* (1975), then graduated to serious confectionary work with the duo of *Jean de Florette* (1986) and *Manon of the Springs* (1986), his reworkings of Pagnol's ode to French civic selfishness become nastiness. In *Uranus* he treats his most ambitious subject yet,[4] from the 1948 novel of the same name by Marcel Aymé (whose work was adapted by Berri and his sister, Arlette Langmann), who was himself the author of articles

Stranger, and that the Santals are identified as the first Indians to resist British colonial rule.

[3] Perhaps a better word here would be "Asian" instead of "Indian," since Ray shares his quietly deliberate, humanistically minuscular style with the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu.

[4] The theme of behavior under the Occupation has not been completely taboo in French film until the appearance of *Uranus*, as some commentators have suggested. There was Emmanuèle Riva's love for a German soldier during the war in Resnais's *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959); Buñuel's *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964), Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* (1974), and Chabrol's *Story of Women* (1988) all examined in one form or another the thorny issue of collaboration with the Nazis; and, of course, Marcel Ophüls ruthlessly exposed the degree of collaboration among the French citizenry in his monumental documentary *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1971).

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for an anti-Semitic newspaper during the Occupation. A friend of the Fascist Céline, Aymé was an outspoken critic of the postwar punishment of collaborators and profiteers, arguing that there was no clear-cut difference between "heroes" and "traitors," no person who was all good or all bad.

Claude Berri would like to think that *Uranus* is a symbolic fable first and only then a realist narrative, and that this is what makes his film special. That is, as he explained in a *New York Times* article,

> It's set in France, but this is what happens anywhere when there is a seizure of power, when the conquerors become the conquered and the conquered become the conquerors. When I see what has happened in Romania, I think, this is *Uranus*. It's what happened in Iran after the overthrow of the Shah. It's France 1945 but it's also East Germany 1991.

In the mistaken belief that it would make his film more fabulous than realistic, Berri had Renato Berta shoot *Uranus* in slightly desaturated color to distinguish it from the black-and-white documentaries and photographs through which the period of the war is remembered, and he cast well-known, knowing actors such as Gérard Depardieu and Philippe Noiret in leading roles featuring long solo speeches because he thought that their characters could thereby become archetypal. I don't wish to deny M. Berri his film's universality, but I'd like to point out to him the truism that the road to universality starts in a particularized place, and the small town in central France where *Uranus* takes place is highly particularized indeed—all the more so by Berta's color cinematography, whose partially denatured quality serves less to allegorize the film's story than to *depict* it, or its world, as enervated if not lifeless, as somewhat otherworldly in the wake of war, occupation, liberation, and recrimination. As for the soliloquies of self-justification or -explanation by Depardieu, Noiret, *et al.*, I was not as bothered as some critics by what I shall call their hyperrealistic theatricality, their introduction of static introspection to an already justifiably static plot that unfolds mainly indoors, inside Archambaud's apartment and Léopold's bar.

In the spring of 1945 Archambaud (Jean-Pierre Marielle), an engineer, and his family must share their large apartment with Watrin (Philippe Noiret), the local schoolmaster, and the Communist Gaigneux (Michel Blanc) and *his* family, whose homes were destroyed by Allied bombs. On the rise politically, the Communists—represented in the film by the railwayman Rochard and the bourgeois intellectual Jourdan in addition to Gaigneux—are relentlessly tracking down and executing Nazi sympathizers, one of whom, Maxime Loin (Gérard Desarthe), the former editor of a pro-German newspaper and a still-convinced Fascist, appears at Archambaud's door seeking a place to hide. The engineer takes him in, with the cooper-

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ation of his wife, Watrin, his daughter, and even his pro-Communist son. Himself neither a member of the Communist-backed Resistance nor a traitor to his country, Archambaud rationalizes his action by declaring, "Collaboration was the lesser of two evils [the second being a torturous death at the hands of the Germans]," but the real reason for his harboring Loin appears to be chance tinged with the inertia of indecision. For immediately before the fugitive turned up on his doorstep, Archambaud was accosted during his nightly walk through the ruins of the city by Communists who thought that *he* was Loin, thus causing him moments later to empathize with the latter's plight. The point is to make the engineer's behavior seem incidental and thus less than heroic, unlike the conduct of those moral stalwarts who harbored Jews in any number of trite Hollywood movies about the Nazi persecution—which is obviously not to say that such moral stalwarts didn't exist, but only to object to their idolization by the cinema of sentiment.[5]

Naturally, what drama there is in *Uranus* comes from the search for the arch-collaborator Loin, all the more so since he is right under Gaigneux's nose. But the collaborator goes undetected for six months, partly because Rochard, to avenge the alcoholic Léopold's bullying of him, accuses the tavern owner himself of hiding Loin, and partly because Gaigneux, Rochard, and Jourdan, for all their anti-Fascist zeal, have political disagreements along with their own problems or concerns. These three are hardly one-dimensional Communist ideologues whom one can easily hate (or love, depending on one's own political bent!). In fact, Gaigneux, who finally discovers Loin only by accident when he mistakes the fugitive's piano-playing for that of Archambaud's daughter, is shown to be his enemy's mirror image in dignity, honesty, and quiet conviction. Again, the point is to obliterate the distinction between hero and villain, criminal and saint, and also to suggest that a person's political or public actions may be incidental to his character.

Even the falsely accused Léopold, the film's most open and appealing figure, is no saint, having engaged in some black marketeering during the war under the auspices of Monglat (Michel Galabru) in addition to serving a German officer or two in his bar. This ex-fairground wrestler's love affair with wine makes him at once *Uranus*' only buffoon, who composes inanely crude alexandrines in the belief that he has a gift for poetry (having been inspired by Racine's *Andromache*, which Watrin's students recite in his tavern, where a makeshift schoolroom has been set up), and first casualty, whom the influential Monglat has the police gun down after Léopold artlessly denounces him in a drunken rage on the town square. Monglat

[5] It's worth nothing that Berri himself is Jewish and that, as a boy during the war (he was born in 1934), he was sent from Nazi-infested Paris to hide with an elderly couple in the country.

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himself is no simple immoralist-cum-power broker: this dealer in fine wines and paintings tells his son that one of the reasons he became a profiteer during the war was his mortification at bringing into the world a human being as disgusting as himself. *Uranus*' blurring of the moral lines between characters even extends to prisoners of war—there are no war *heroes* in this film, only figurative as well as literal *prisoners* of war—who return home to France by train after five years in German camps. Among them are Charles Watrin, the schoolmaster's son, and his best friend, Fernand Gallien, who cooperated with the enemy while he was their captive yet whose right to collaborate the loyalist Charles defends.

Charles's repatriation is clouded by the news of his mother's death. She died, his father reports, when the bomb that destroyed their home killed her too; what he leaves out is that she was in a neighboring house in the arms of her lover, who also perished. Watrin himself was alone in bed, reading in an astronomy series about Uranus, that dark and icy planet so remote in our solar system, when the bomb fell at 11:15 P.M. As he poignantly tells Archambaud and Loin, each night at 11:15, whether he is asleep or awake, he feels the terrible weight of Uranus bearing down upon him, creating in his soul an unbearable "cosmic anguish." So grateful is he when morning comes that he greets it, and with it the earth's beauty as well as mankind's frailty, with the wonder of Adam in the Garden of Eden. But in a sense Watrin is still somewhere on Uranus, far removed from the reality of life on the planet earth, especially a war-torn earth. Or, one could say, his corner of the earth in France has itself become, through the horror of war and the humiliation of conquest, another planet, a kind of Uranus hurtling into the void. From the distance of Uranus, the schoolmaster—a type of stranger in or alien observer of his own land—declares that "nothing in man is evil," that "there's nothing more wonderful than human life," in which all he sees is "a constant flow of joy." From his vantage point, wars, concentration camps, and criminal justice alike are only "pranks."

Is the affable Watrin irresponsibly naïve and self-deluding, as one critic called him, or is his perspective the only one to take in a world without heroes and villains where to a large extent change, circumstance, or accident determines all human behavior? Is the truth in what Watrin says, in this case, the kind that makes us realize how small we are in the universal scheme of things at the same time as it congratulates us on our exceptionality? Or is his character finally just an instance of moral equivocation on Aymé's, and by extension Berri's, part, of allowing ethical questions to intrude on the realm of the aesthetic for the arch purpose of not answering them? And is that purpose underlined by the film's deployment of an overly schematicized, patly ambiguous cast of characters apart from Watrin?: the pitiable yet unrepentant Fascist; the dedicated but flawed Commu-

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nists; the war profiteer who is something of an aesthete; the drunken and voluble, but also lovable and lustful, bistro proprietor; etc.

Part of the problem in Berri's adaptation of the novel for the screen is that he has completely sacrificed, assuming he could ever have captured, Aymé's keen satire and biting sense of humor, while both retaining most of the book's ample dialogue and foreshortening its principal characters. The result is that the film appears flat and coy, whereas it should be teeming and irreverent, and topped off not so much by Watrin's point of view as by the satirist's simultaneous adoption and derision of it. Berri could have helped himself here had he asked Jean-Claude Petit to provide him with a sprightly, ironic score instead of a pensive, "illustrative" one. Such a score would have been of particular help during the closing moments when, as a scantily attended ceremony off to the left of a long shot honors the Resistance dead, Gaigneux leads Maxime Loin diagonally through the rubble of the town to arrest and certain execution. As they pass Archambaud and Watrin in speculative conversation along the way, it is a slowly craning camera that looks down upon all four of them.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

The Guggenheim Returns

THOMAS KRENS IS NOTHING IF NOT AMBITIOUS. This, you will remember, is the man who dreamed of turning an abandoned factory complex in the sleepy town of North Adams, Massachusetts into the Minimalist art center of the Western world (a quixotic, costly venture that died a natural death) and who, for his first show as director of the Guggenheim Museum in 1989, packed that building's walls with more paintings for that one exhibition than it had held for any three shows before. While many other art institutions exist today in a state of nervous retrenchment—staff cutbacks, reduced hours, fewer big loan exhibitions—the Guggenheim under Krens promises to be bigger and gaudier than any of them at their peak, with branches in SoHo and Europe. Clearly the mandate the new director received from the board that selected him was the transformation of the museum from its sedate fourth-place slot in the New York hierarchy (behind the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan, and the Whitney) to a position of revivified cultural eminence and popular appeal.

After years of planning, design delays, fierce architectural debate, and actual construction work, during which time the whole place was closed, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (organized as a foundation in 1937 and reincarnated in its trademark building by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1959) reopened to the public in the summer of 1992. So the moment is upon us, finally, to see the art from this great collection that has been kept from view for so long and to evaluate Krens's vision. The response in the art world and the press has, naturally, ranged from public relations-ecstatic to mournful and querulous. I find myself a little more in sympathy with the celebrants than the Cassandras.

Any consideration of the new Guggenheim has got to begin with a fair acknowledgement of the problems this institution has had to confront in the last few years, problems that, taken en masse, very few other museums have had to deal with. The Guggenheim desperately needed space. Since the 1970s, it has been apparent that the old quarters were hopelessly cramped. Yet, between 88th and 89th Streets, there wasn't any land to be bought up and built on (no park to expand into, as was the case for the Guggenheim's neighbor on Fifth Avenue and 82nd Street), and any decisions about altering or expanding the original building had to be strictly governed by a commitment to Wright's splendid but maddening structure. (Splen-

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did because it is one of the glories of Manhattan architecture, maddening because it is—as anyone who has spent time there knows—one of the most frustrating places in which to look at paintings and sculptures in a stationary mode.) The initial plans called for a huge tower to be constructed to the side and back of the spiral, an idea which was quickly shelved in the face of community and art-world protest. What we have instead is a smaller sculptural block, or tower, of office and gallery space, two more, somewhat narrow floors added for the Thannhauser wing of French art, and a dispersal of the collection to other sites, the museum's new branches. Far from an ideal solution, especially since we are still left without a sizable area for the permanent collection, but it is hard to be too indignant when one considers how few alternatives the Guggenheim leadership was left with.

For the grand reopening of the museum this summer, Krens and his staff (including his newest curator, Mark Rosenthal, a first-rate catch, wooed away from the Philadelphia Museum of Art) filled the rotunda with a large display of Dan Flavin's Minimalist light sculpture and the four floors of the tower with selections from the permanent collection and loans from choice private collections. The decision to honor Flavin with the inaugural show was probably a wise one on two counts: it showed this particular artist off to the best possible advantage, and the work itself, given its size and materials (conjoining tubes of fluorescent light), didn't in any way prevent the viewer from appreciating the newly repaired, freshly painted essence of Wright's own work of art. Indeed, with Minimalism, context is everything. In the wrong setting, this tributary of contemporary art (not a hearty experience in the best of circumstances) can seem pretty thin. Yet at the Guggenheim, Flavin's bands of polychromatic neon worked their unostentatious magic effectively and efficiently. Our encounter with the historical rooms in the tower—one floor devoted to Pop Art, one to Abstract Expressionism, one to geometric abstraction, etc.—was, however, a little disappointing. The one-of-every-major-name style of installation doesn't work anymore; everybody who goes to museums regularly (and not merely those who write about art) knows the names and the trademark pictures. In 1992, we need some surprises, some startling juxtapositions, a few names or paintings of quality we didn't expect, maybe an abandonment of the time-line or style-categorizing arrangement. In the Thannhauser wing, we were able to get reacquainted with the museum's Gauguins, Seurats, and Picassos, but the new space didn't do a great deal to alter the old viewing conditions. By now, one associates these paintings with low ceilings, tight corridors, and infuriating obstructive columns, and nothing about a second or third floor of the same is going to change that impression. This group of pictures has always deserved a better layout.

(To digress for a moment on the subject of permanent collection hangings: now that the Museum of Modern Art has dismantled its

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second and third floor rooms for the massive Matisse retrospective, it has rehung a goodly chunk of its treasures in the ground-floor rooms. And well worth your time it is, this new arrangement. Placed by theme rather than chronology or style, the works have never looked more interesting. A designation like "The Body" allows the nudes of Picasso and de Kooning to be hung in proximity to Bellocq's photographs of prostitutes, Tom Wesselman's sexy lips, and a Robert Gober leg projecting from the wall. "The City" gives us Gary Winogrand, Ludwig Kirchner, Georg Grosz, John Marin, Robert Longo, George Segal, and Robert Colescott in the same two rooms—a refreshing break from the confines of the traditional canon.)

Downtown, in SoHo, the Guggenheim opened its local branch with much fanfare and just the sort of unusual choices one missed uptown. Specifically, the two gigantic floors of the Prince Street-Broadway building were set aside for two Modernist Old Masters and two Minimalists—Kandinsky sharing territory with Carl Andre's sleek floor sculptures, Brancusi with the all-white paintings of Robert Ryman. Voices have been raised (some of them rather shrill) questioning the removal of masterworks like the Kandinskys from their home base, yet it can be argued that all such paintings need to be seen afresh, and one way of doing that is to place them in a radically new, even jarring setting. Now, whether rooms this size are hospitable to the scale, detail, and earnest mysticism of a Kandinsky is something to wonder about, but there is no doubt that the larger Brancusis do well there. We were able to walk around these magnificent sculptures, approach them from various angles, ponder them from a distance of half a city block, inching closer by stages, none of which is possible in the ordinary museum gallery. The tedious, monochromatic Ryman seemed to me a lackluster choice for the contemporary parallel, or contrast, that the curators were aiming for, but Krens's devotion to Minimalism is a given in this situation.

For the show that followed the Flavin and the peek at the permanent collection on 88th Street, the Guggenheim presented its biggest display ever, another testimony to the new ambitiousness at work here. (It is to be hoped that the practice of emptying the rooms in the new tower for changing exhibitions isn't going to be the norm. Some priority has to be given to the permanent collection. Otherwise, given what that jauntiness will signify, we're all in trouble.) "The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932" might have been thought to be a redundant experience, following so soon after the 1991 Kazimir Malevich and Luibov Popova exhibitions at the Metropolitan and the Modern, respectively. But that wasn't the case—far from it. Those excellent shows last year were about the essence of Suprematism and its variations, geometric abstraction as a philosophical and artistic quest, focusing on two distinctive, troubled careers. "The Great Utopia," on the other hand, aimed to be the last word on the subject and all its ramifications, the most comprehensive

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possible treatment of the work done by those Russian and Soviet artists (including Suprematists) who believed they were creating a new world order in the aftermath of the October Revolution.

This exhibition was nothing short of staggering—and informative beyond anything the press releases led one to expect. Nor could something of comparable range have been attempted in any less space than "The Great Utopia" takes up. For what the show did was not only to present choice examples of Malevich's Suprematism, Rodchenko's Constructivism, the famous output of Vladimir Tatlin, El Lissitsky, or Naum Gabo, but to offer examples of work by all of the figures who would have been a part of the scene in Moscow and Leningrad—idealistically remaking the visual landscape of their country, doing away with realism and Impressionism as aggressively as their political leaders had done away with monarchy and capitalism—but whose names are completely unknown to American audiences. The Cubism of Nadezhda Udal'tsova and Ivan Puni, the geometric abstractions of Ol'ga Rozanova and Mikhail Men'kov, the watercolors of Il'ia Chashnik, the varied talent of Aleksandr Vesnin: these were only a few of the great surprises I enjoyed at this exhibition. Not surprisingly, painting and sculpture were not the whole story; the Soviet avant-garde under Lenin, before the coming of Socialist Realism, ardently espoused the need to affect all aspects of life in the new state. So the Guggenheim was *packed* with textiles, posters (one of the best sections of the whole enormous business), ceramics, theater design models, architectural models, and photographs, some of them of unsurpassed inventiveness and dynamism. Somehow, that we know the sad end in the 1930s of this visionary cycle didn't diminish the thrill of studying—to the point of overload—its lofty and absurd intentions, its captivating if quixotic realization. With a wallop, the Guggenheim returns.

The Whitney Museum's principal summer fare was the George Bellows show that originated earlier in the year at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and will travel to Columbus, Ohio and Fort Worth in the winter. This was a well-timed exhibition; if oil-on-canvas has made a comeback in America in the last several years, having been relegated to the shadows during the heyday of Conceptualism in the 1970s, then it makes sense now to look with a fresh eye at the important native talents from an earlier period, our true "painterly" classics.

And painterly Bellows was. He loved the stuff—just gloried in it, its breathtaking thickness and weight, its mass and palette-knife crusts. There's an almost athletic feel to the way the creator of *Stag at Sharkey's* (1907) or *Up the Hudson* (1908) moved his brush across the canvas to give a convincing sense of taut, sweating flesh or wind-driven water, or gouged out thick orange-yellow lines of cloud against the deepening blue sky of *Pennsylvania Station Excavation* (c. 1907–09),

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or massed and scumbled areas of white to suggest twisting clouds of smoke. (Between all of his trains, steam shovels, and chugging tugboats, billowing smoke could be said to be the really obsessive Bellows leitmotif.) This kind of skilled sensuality, a reverence for physical sensation and intense color, is—or can be—a good in itself, but it wasn't the whole story for Bellows. He was also interested in offering an interpretation of America in his time, and in that sense his virility meant the perfect merger of style and subject matter. Even more than the spirited, colorful views of the Hudson River (of which there were some superb examples at the Whitney), his renderings of tenement life, fight scenes, and urban excavations gave him the themes he needed.

In an interesting book on Bellows that was published just as this show opened, art historian Marianne Doezema reminds us, though, that Bellows' adventurousness must be taken in a certain light.[1] The aggressiveness with which Bellows painted his pugilists, his Lower East Side kids swimming in the East River, or his construction sites was highly original, but his intellectual content was decidedly unthreatening to his turn-of-the-century audiences—hence, his great success in his day. His urchins are happy fellows unbowed by poverty, while the boxing fans are a crude lot and the excavation pictures are hymns to progress. Growth and energy were Bellows' gods. In other words, the man was no Jacob Riis or Upton Sinclair; he was, instead, the perfect artistic representative of Teddy Roosevelt's creed of "the strenuous life." Keeping this perspective in mind, it wasn't necessarily surprising, then, to watch the dramatic falling-off of Bellows' talent in the last two or three rooms of the exhibition which featured the work of his post-urban period. His landscapes are competent but pretty unexciting, the later portraits are stiff and not at all convincing (like too many of the urban realists, Bellows was never strong on anatomy), and the one large crucifixion scene is appallingly bad. With traditional themes, the old magic wasn't there.

Still and all, in a time of suffocating gentility in American art, Bellows' early paintings must have seemed almost frighteningly robust. That his angle on his "river rats" and city-transforming machinery was essentially uncritical, making Bellows a chronicler of his time rather than an analyst of its shortcomings and complexities, doesn't diminish his authority, his liberation of paint from fine drawing. It simply suggests how long it took American artists to awaken to the potentially political nature of their art form—an issue solved in our day with a vengeance.

At the Brooklyn Museum, the wider context of Bellows' era was illustrated in the first full-scale exhibition of "The Eight" in New York in more than a few decades. Curated by Elizabeth Milroy, this show

[1] GEORGE BELLOWS AND URBAN AMERICA, by *Marianne Doezema*. Yale University Press. $45.00.

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was a survey of the strangest collection of painters (taken as a group, as their numerical title implies) in American art history. What makes "The Eight" an inscrutable idea for an exhibition, to anyone who simply went and looked at the paintings, is that these eight men have very little in common—not by any stretch of the imagination could one find a stylistic link between the mythic, dream-like vision of Arthur Davies and the robust, earthy George Luks, or between the neo-Impressionism of Maurice Prendergast and *McSorley's Bar* (1912) or *Dock Street Market* (1903) by John Sloan. Obviously, then, "Painters of a New Century: The Eight and American Art" addressed a social and historical theme as much as a formalist one, and some background knowledge was crucial to an appreciation of what was to be seen at the Brooklyn Museum. That background concerns an attitude toward vocation and exhibition more than style, for "The Eight" were our most outspoken critics of the Academicians' stranglehold on American cultural life circa 1908, and their makeshift alliance in that year was for the purpose of asserting their right to treat subjects (indelicate by the standards of the day or otherwise) in personal, un-academic ways. Their rebellion opened doors, cleared the air, endorsed pluralism some seventy years before we used the word.

What was to be seen on the walls in Brooklyn was the living tradition of American realism at its best, a reminder that the whole story of our past—of what is worth looking at—isn't encompassed exclusively by the Armory Show and the influence of European Modernism, though most textbooks would teach us otherwise. Milroy astutely chose her examples of each man's work. Sloan is known for his urban scenes, but *Stein, Profile* (1905) and *City from the Palisades* (1908) show him as an able portrait painter and an exuberant landscape artist. Many of Robert Henri's portraits have a generic feel to them, but not his *Portrait of George Luks* (1904) or *Portrait of Miss Josephine Nivison* (1906), the future Mrs. Edward Hopper. William Glackens was represented by the range of his experience, from the darkness of Hammerstein's roof garden to the bright stagey-ness of his family group portrait, and Luks himself, thought to be a more volatile Bellows, proves in the faint color harmonies of *Roundhouse at Highbridge* (1909) and the expertly done shadows and figures of *Bleecker and Carmine Streets* (1915) that he could be exactingly craftsmanlike when he needed to be, that he had finesse as well as bravura in him. This immensely pleasing show did equally well by Ernest Lawson, Arthur Davies, Maurice Prendergast, and Everett Shinn. All of these men were not equally gifted—Davies and Shinn are the most negligible talents of the group—but, as an artificial unit, a band of healthy malcontents, they speak well for following one's own bent.

At the galleries: The Jim Morphesis show at the Littlejohn-Sternau Gallery on 57th Street was a particularly elegant (and, simultaneously, robust) way to ease into the new art season. For years, Morphesis was

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known in New York largely by reputation. A California painter, he was seen in the East infrequently, and his works in those mid-eighties days were thickly painted oils with vestiges of imagery (often skulls) emerging from a forest of dense, dissonant brushstrokes. His new paintings are a little less frenetic but no less energized or commanding. These diptychs and triptychs show the male figure from the neck to the thighs, frontally or from the back, with a great deal of emphasis on rich texture, areas of light and dark, and roughhewn manipulation of paint. Drips and smudges are visible everywhere, with bits of gold-leaf added that heighten the color effects and give a slightly classical feel to these otherwise blunt images. An especially odd and appealing aspect of the paintings is the use of painted words and bits of sentences, erased to the point of illegibility, near the human forms. It's as if some message were being conveyed about the body, its heroic or Homeric potential, that we can no longer receive or interpret. The effect of all this muscular nakedness isn't sensational or homoerotic—it's just erotic, affirming (in a time of wasting illness and trepidation) and, at the same time, a little obscure and mysterious. Also, thinking recently about George Bellows and his confidence, his color sense, and his faith in the evocative power of his art makes time spent with Morphesis' works all the more meaningful. These paintings create their own aura of certitude and pleasure in the act of painting. They aren't arch or insufferably ironic. They are another signal that the Minimalist era is behind us, that sensuality—as distinct from prettiness or languor—is still part of the modern painter's world, as it is of ours.

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ALAN DAVIS

The Holiness of the Ordinary

IN THINKING ABOUT THE TWO RAYMOND CARVER BOOKS under review here[1] and in trying to measure the arc of Carver's extraordinary (and all too brief) career, I keep coming back to something Luc Sante wrote in a recent issue of *The New York Review of Books*: "It may be, however, that no intentions or skills can contend with the poverty of realism in an age of documentary saturation."[2]

Taken out of context—Sante is writing on Richard Price's *Clockers*, a powerful but baggy saga about drug dealers and cops in the New Jersey projects—these words might well serve as an indictment of "minimalism," a convenient term even if, by now, a critically hollow one. (Calling a writer a minimalist is about as useful, and as dated, as calling him an existentialist, but, for better or worse, Carver is almost always cited as the practitioner par excellence of the school.) Minimalism, of course, is fiction of affectlessness, in which dazed characters—mostly divorced, often drunk or hungover, maybe unemployed, remarried and adulterous, maybe bankrupt, occasionally violent—move through a bleak landscape of strip malls and Burger Kings, speaking in short, declarative sentences. They are apolitical creatures who participate, either as instigators or victims, in petty acts of betrayal and disillusionment. They only know how to keep on keeping on. One thing happens, then another thing happens, then the story stops, sometimes with an arresting image but hardly ever with an earned epiphany or with any traditionally developed plot of the type, say, that Katherine Anne Porter employed.

That is what I take the "poverty of realism" to mean—action without significance or aesthetic framing. How can such thin broth compete, say, with the *New York Times*? In fact, though, no writer worth his or her salt subscribes to such a minimalist formula as I have just outlined it. Still, as somebody said somewhere—I wish I had said it—there is too much diction and not enough syntax in too much contemporary fiction; Carver's enormous influence is probably as much to blame for such mannered writing, when it appears, as anything else. He is certainly no minimalist, but I can see how he gets

[1] NO HEROICS, PLEASE: Uncollected Writings, by *Raymond Carver*. Ed. by *William L. Stull*. Vintage Contemporaries. $10.00p. WILL YOU PLEASE BE QUIET, PLEASE?, by *Raymond Carver*. Vintage Contemporaries. $10.00p.

[2] "The Possessed" (July 16, 1992), p. 25.

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lumped with them—whoever *they* are.[3] His range is apparently limited, the situations and characters of minimalism appear with what seems to be depressing regularity in story after story, and any number of his characters seem incapable of growth.

And yet he is magical. There is no other word for it. Powers and principalities—that is, the investiture of human significance, of something which is greater than the sum of its parts, something which must be embodied in fiction if it is to see the light of day at all—inhabit almost every story in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* It is an essential collection to have back in print, a seminal work, like *Winesburg, Ohio* or *In Our Time*, the announcement of the arrival of a major new voice speaking in and redefining its social idiom. Despite their domestic detail and familiar working-class settings, most of the stories manage to remain strange. The artfulness of Carver, the way he consciously chisels a world out of workaday detail, becomes quickly apparent after perusing his earliest stories or his stab at a novel, now available in *No Heroics, Please*. There is little enough magic in those pieces: "from *The Augustine Notebooks*," a fragment of a novel published in 1979, is embarrassing mock-Hemingway that gets away from Carver at almost every turn; "Bright Red Apples," as his widow and fellow writer Tess Gallagher admits in her useful foreword, "doesn't seem to know what it's about"; and "Furious Seasons," a story about incest which shows the influence of Faulkner, is powerful in patches but finally almost incoherent. In those early stories, published between 1963 and 1969, the "poverty of realism" is everywhere to be seen. But by 1976, when *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* was published by McGraw-Hill through the intercession of Gordon Lish,[4] Carver had found both his fictional people and, most importantly, a spare ironic style exactly right for chronicling the terror barely contained by everyday routine.

A story like "What Is It?" (or any of a dozen others in the book) is far scarier than anything by Stephen King. Leo, bankrupt, sends Toni out to sell their convertible, symbol of good times and of their affection, before it's repossessed.

> "You look great. [Leo says] I'd buy a car from you anytime." "But you don't have money," she says, peering into the mirror. She pats her hair, frowns. "And your credit's lousy. You're nothing," she says. "Teasing," she says. . . .

By the end of the story, when a used-car salesman drops her off

[3] Commentaries on minimalism are legion. See, most recently, John Aldridge, *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction* (New York, 1992). Russell Banks, one of the alleged practitioners of such fiction, responds incisively to Aldridge in the May 1992 issue of *The Atlantic*.

[4] Tobias Wolff, "Introduction," in *American Fiction: Number 3*, ed. by Michael C. White and Alan Davis (New York, 1992), p. xii.

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near dawn in the convertible which he now owns, everything is used up and we know their lives inside out, down to the "pedigreed terrier named Ginger" they once owned and which was "run over in the street." At story's end, she falls asleep and he studies her stretch marks, which are "like roads. . . . They run everywhere in her flesh, dozens, perhaps hundreds of them. He remembers waking up in the morning after they bought the car, seeing it, there in the drive, in the sun, gleaming." It's a heartbreaking finish, a performance stunning in its social implication and metaphorical rigor.

Performance after performance like "What Is It?" chronicle isolation and breakdown, as well as the ache, often acted out in voyeuristic terms, to connect with another life, however perverse or futile the connection might be. Only strangers are able to talk to one another, and then only sporadically; the more intimate the characters, the less they listen to each other. The social context is almost always integral to the story. His two subsequent collections, *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* (1981) and *Cathedral* (1983), continue to bring together characters who have been damaged by alcohol, bad behavior, loss and inconsolable emptiness, circumstances both social and psychological. But counterpointing such incessant psychic isolation in later stories is the attempt "to get it talked out," to connect authentically in a damaged world.

If specious labels had any meaning, we could just as well name Carver a blue-collar existentialist as a minimalist. Carver, that is, is a member of no school, and I often wonder if there is a sincere ideological subtext when the "less is less" school and the "less is more" school either shun him as overrated or embrace him as a comrade-in-arms. Or, as I suspect, is it simply a matter of coarse literary politics, people keeping track of how many column inches in one book review or another get devoted to one group of writers or another? The brouhaha seems beside the point. The idea of being catholic in one's tastes seems to have gone out of fashion in certain circles. There is no need, for instance, to choose between Faulkner and Hemingway; we can have both, or either. At their best, both are masters, one mandarin and one demotic. And both were stubborn enough, and scrupulously honest enough in much of their work (despite their grievous human faults), to enter the canon and to refuse to leave it, whatever the polemical fashion of the day. Carver's stance in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* is also scrupulously honest, if sometimes incomplete and inelastic (more on that shortly). The luminous serenity he seemed to come to by the time of his death, at age fifty, from lung cancer, may have reflected not only his belief in a new life, beyond alcoholism and with Tess Gallagher (who has since made a second career as his widow), but also his assurance of his mastery, of his place in the canon, and his sense of where, given time, he might get to.

One of the last statements he wrote about such matters is published

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in *No Heroics, Please* as "On Longer Stories," an introduction to *American Fiction 88*. Along with "All My Relations" and "Fiction of Occurrence and Consequence," earlier introductions to other anthologies, it serves as the clearest statement of his evolving aesthetic. In it, he talks about a "healthy ambition afoot to extend the reach of stories past the ten-to-fifteen-page manuscript, perhaps toward a scope which takes advantage of what have been more novelistic strategies . . . young writers may have begun to prefer, or at least to explore, a more elastic territory for the short story, one that also dispenses, to some degree, with conclusiveness, and opts instead for the strengths of what we might call the tapestry of relationship and event." In my opinion, a number of Carver's earlier stories are quite inelastic, settling for a stunning effect and a palpable sense of dislocation (hard enough to achieve in themselves, and quite beyond the reach of most of his contemporaries), but not yet working out fully "the tapestry of relationship and event." In *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* for instance, the title story, in which a man forces from his wife an account of a single long-ago infidelity and then, his illusion of domestic bliss shattered, spends a dark night of the soul in the back-alley bars of his city before returning home to make his peace, is one of the few which try for such a novelistic tapestry.

Most famously, "The Bath," from *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, becomes "A Small, Good Thing" in *Cathedral*. In the earlier episodic story, ten pages long, a mother drives to a bakery and orders a cake for her son's birthday. In the meanwhile, the son collapses after an accident into a coma, the cake is forgotten, and the mother and father stay mostly at the hospital. Several phone calls from the disgruntled baker culminate at story's end with an anonymous call at home to the exhausted mother, who's waiting to hear about her son Scotty.

> "Scotty," the voice said. "It is about Scotty," the voice said. "It has to do with Scotty, yes."

Is it the baker or the doctor? The story's mannered finish is more shocking than revealing. The later story, by contrast, is some 30 pages, and it's one of Carver's most satisfying fictions. Following the son's death, the paraphernalia of grief is fully explored, and finally husband and wife drive to the bakery and confront the baker.

> "I know bakers work at night," Ann said. "They make phone calls at night, too. You bastard," she said.

The baker, contrite, feeds them hot baked goods.

> "You got to understand what it comes down to is I don't know how

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to act anymore, it would seem. Please," the man said, "let me ask you if you can find it in your hearts to forgive me?"

And later, they talk and listen to each other. "They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving."

Carver, that is, travels in his own way from Hemingway at his tersest to the ironic luminous wisdom of Chekhov, the patron saint of his later years whose death is the subject of his last story, "Errand." By then (less than five years ago!), Carver's voice was also elastic enough to blossom, in two of his latest stories ("Elephant" and "Whoever Was Using This Bed," collected in *Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories*), into an astonishing offbeat humor. I heard Carver read the second of those stories in North Dakota and was floored by the reach of the tale and by the belly laughs his deadpan delivery elicited from many of us in the audience. Even in his earliest work Carver has always managed to be funny—blackly humorous and absurd, sometimes grotesque—but the two stories mentioned above contain a grand comic vision which both comments upon and extends his earlier themes. "Elephant," which is about debt and commitment, is told by a man who becomes a holy fool of the most beatific kind, and "Whoever Was Using This Bed," about mortality, is a wonderful litany by an insomniac husband and wife of every conceivable kind of medical complaint. Carver, always a miniaturist but seldom a minimalist, has come full circle to a fictional vision which is translucent and sweet-natured, almost mystical, without being either sentimental or utopian.

Raymond Carver enjoyed only ten years or so of recognition before his death, and most of the rest of the uncollected writing in *No Heroics, Please* consists of reviews, a chapbook's worth of mostly awful poetry, and a couple of brief touching essays, one on his friendships with Tobias Wolff and Richard Ford, and one a "Meditation on a Line from Saint Teresa," which was delivered as a commencement address at the University of Hartford. As a reviewer, Carver is generous, occasionally to a fault, but insightful, honest, and impatient with tripe. He tellingly attacks the excesses of Jeffrey Meyers' biography of Hemingway, for instance, and he is brusquely dismissive of Richard Brautigan's *The Tokyo-Montana Express,* a book which I have not read: "So you can take this book or leave it. It won't help you along any in this life, or hurt you, to read it. It won't change the way you look at things, or people, or make a dent of any size in your emotional life."

That is almost never the case with Carver's own work. "The accurate depiction of despair can be exhilarating, a cognitive emotion," Walker Percy wrote, and Carver moves from such depictions, sometimes bleak, sometimes almost antic, to an apprehension of the

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holiness of the ordinary.[5] His sensibility, that is, becomes overtly sacramental.

He refused to be budged from his chosen ground, which remained resolutely bounded by his milieu, but he turned absolutely away from the poverties of reality to its glories. On the one hand, his celebrated poem "Gravy," published posthumously, is mostly a report, a document, and barely an aesthetic experience, but it's worth reading for its documentary value, as testimony to his celebration of the things we must lose or give up, including at last our own lives. In his fiction, on the other hand, he almost never reported, he *made*, and the sacramental nature of the fiction, as opposed to the experience which engendered it, is paramount. "In fiction that matters," he says in one of his reviews, "the significance of the action inside the story translates to the lives of people outside the story." I cannot think of a better definition of the sacramental except, perhaps, for the line from Saint Teresa he meditated upon at the very end of his life: "Words lead to deeds. . . . They prepare the soul, make it ready, and move it to tenderness."

[5] Walker Percy, "An Interview with Zoltan Abadi-Nagy," in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. by Patrick Samway (New York, 1991), p. 379. "The Holiness of the Ordinary" is the title of a brief essay in the same book.

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DAVID MASON

Mythical Histories

ONE OF THE PLEASURES OF WRITING these chronicle reviews is discovering writers I have never heard of before. Faced with my ignorance, I can only attempt to find the life inside each work as it comes to me, reporting on its success or failure in terms of my own experience. Twenty-three books were delivered to my home last spring, and a few repaid reading so richly that I doubt I will ever forget them. Two of the best were by writers (Sigurd Hoel and Susan Howatch) about whom I knew not even the smallest bit of gossip. It has been a long time since I felt, as a reader of fiction, so surprised and grateful.

A well-written novel has the power to disturb or renew us through fully-realized stories. I am instructed by the Modern Greek word for novel, *mythistorema*, which has both myth and history as its roots. Clearly a novel gains authenticity by having a real story to tell, a story that hums with communal resonance, teaching us to think and feel more fully by the guiding spirit of empathy. This is why I have little patience for the fashion of discussing fictional characters merely as verbal constructs. If we don't sense them as human presences, no matter how cartoonish, then the experience of fiction possesses little value. Perhaps, though, these remarks are colored by a peculiar susceptibility; I am writing them while alone in a cabin in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, far from the politics of literary reputation.

And perhaps that is why I begin with something so old-fashioned as a rural tragedy. Sigurd Hoel's *The Troll Circle*, first published in 1958 and newly translated from the Norwegian, is the latest example of Scandinavian literature brought out by the University of Nebraska Press.[1] But don't let the helpful footnotes that accompany the text fool you into thinking this is a dusty old unreadable masterpiece; it's the real thing, a vivid and wrenching historical novel that lingers in the mind long after you have read it. According to the translator's afterword, Hoel, who died in 1960, was a social realist, and *The Troll Circle* is certainly a prime example of realistic fiction. But because it is set in an isolated community in the years between 1818 and 1833, among people whose lives are dominated by folktales and superstitions, the realism is permeated by tragic myth. The brutish cotters and farmers who populate this northern parish have barely evolved from

[1] THE TROLL CIRCLE, by *Sigurd Hoel*. Trans. by *Sverre Lyngstad*. University of Nebraska Press. $35.00.

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the barnyard pungence of the Middle Ages (I was frequently reminded of Janet Lewis' novella, *The Wife of Martin Guerre*). In one magnificent satirical scene a man named Hans Nordby swindles his neighbor for land while his wife lies dying in a back room of the house.

Apparently Hoel carried the inspiration for this novel from childhood, when he saw an executioner's block used in an actual beheading. His hero and victim is Håvard Viland, who marries into land in the parish, leaving his own family and ambiguous past behind, hoping to create a modern farm. What he discovers is a village in which "Not very much happened . . . , and people had few opportunities of forgetting anything." Like one of Tolstoy's idealists, Håvard makes the mistake of expecting people to be better than they are. One of his few allies in the project is a hunter named Jon, who is more realistic: "Have you ever seen a crows' parliament? A hundred crows sit in a circle, and in the middle sits the one who's *different*. And when those hundred have stared at it long enough, they hurl themselves upon it and hack it to pieces."

From the start Håvard's position in the parish is tenuous. Not only is he the outsider with modern views, but he sets out to improve a farm that still belongs to his wife, Rønnau, who in turn holds it for Kjersti, her stepdaughter by a previous marriage. Hoel carefully probes the psychological layers of Håvard's guilty past, the pleasures and difficulties of his marriage, and his dealings with suspicious neighbors. His dreams trouble him with images of fate; the ancient knife he has forged into a modern scythe retains a worrisome aura of witchcraft and murder. Ultimately, the social, psychological and mythical elements of the novel converge in what the peasants call a troll circle: "The past which avenges itself, fate which bites its own tail, like a serpent. . . ."

I doubt that Håvard's tragedy, the cruel absurdity of his trial for a murder he did not commit, would be so powerful if he were not a deeply sympathetic character, despite his foolishness. And Hoel has used the economic and mythological details of the parish with relentless perfection. This isn't one of those tragedies in which the cards are all stacked against the hero; he is clearly an accessory to his own destruction, partly because of his inability to understand the women in his household. Rønnau and Kjersti, too, are given some complexity; their frequent attractiveness makes it all the more horrifying when everything goes wrong in their lives. I had forgotten that tragedy could be so enjoyable; even knowing how this book finishes, I can imagine rereading it with dreadful pleasure.

Ambrose Bierce called novels inflated short stories, which may have been sour grapes—he never wrote one himself. But in the best novels every detail is so skillfully used that condensation would be a travesty. My impression on finishing Toni Morrison's latest historical fiction

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was that here was a short story inflated by literary style.[2] I kept asking myself as I read why this short book was so foggy and slow. I realized that I was supposed to appreciate Morrison's prose (and there are certainly magnificent passages); I was supposed to be enthralled or impressed (I'm not sure which) by the improvisational narrative and verbal riffs she or her self-conscious narrator played. But alas, all this brilliance prevented me from caring much about her characters; an appreciation of the author's gifts is not enough to sustain my interest.

Morrison's story is about two Southerners, Joe and Violet Trace, transplanted to New York in the early years of this century, whose lives are disrupted in the twenties when Joe has an affair with a young girl named Dorcas. The destined-to-be-famous opening paragraph gives us the central scene, or motif, of Morrison's jazz composition:

> . . . I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deep down, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church. She ran, then, through all that snow, and when she got back to her apartment she took the birds from their cages and set them out the windows to freeze or fly, including the parrot that said, "I love you."

It's *Bleak House* written by Márquez and rescored for the tenor sax. But Morrison's narrator is merely an anonymous literary presence who has studied postmodernism, and the very real story at the core of this novel is obscured by verbal music of uneven quality. Even the startling incident of the opening has little impact on the characters' lives; it's easy for the narrator to fabricate their redemption.

Virtually all of the novels I have chosen to review are historical, and in the best of them this signals a refreshing willingness on the part of the authors to create richly textured fictional societies. Morrison's characters live with racism and the residue of slavery, social issues of the greatest importance to contemporary America, which only makes me wish I had found her approach more compelling. Her recent novels, including *Jazz*, place special emphasis on the transitional years of the late nineteenth century, and it is interesting to note how differently that period is viewed in Annie Dillard's first novel, a pioneer epic of the Pacific Northwest.[3] According to Dillard, whose research is meticulous, the decade before her novel opens in 1855 had seen blacks banned from the Oregon colony. Her straightforward

[2] JAZZ, by *Toni Morrison*. Knopf. $21.00.
[3] THE LIVING, by *Annie Dillard*. HarperCollins. $22.50.

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narrative deals mostly with white settlers in what would become Bellingham, Washington, but pauses to comment on the fate of Lummi Indians and imported Chinese workers.

Ranging over the five decades in which towns began to grow along Bellingham Bay and the Nooksack River, Dillard lays out an inviting spread of historical detail. As it happens, I knew some of it because Bellingham is my hometown, and I felt from a distance some curiosity concerning what this relative outsider would say about it. A recent article in the Bellingham *Herald* gently chided Dillard for adding nothing new to previous histories of the community, but I found her collector's eye for arcane knowledge and vocabulary pleasing. As you would expect from the author of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she displays a naturalist's sense of the landscape, which she calls "the rough edge of the world, where the trees came smack down to the stones." She gets the vegetation right, down to the "hazel and alder, and plaguey thickets of blackberry." She knows how the ramshackle cabins and sawmills of these settlers were hacked out of dense forests of huge firs and cedars, how the slowly-evolving weather and the hovering presence of mountains made time's passage grandly impressive. Even though the Northwest strongly registered every economic tremor in the rest of the country, life there was relatively sedate. Travelling through Eastern cities, one of her characters realizes that "she had forgotten both how poor people could be, and how rich."

The one consistent conflict is, I suppose, that between living and dying, and for the most part it is viewed with an emotional reticence appropriate for her characters. But even Homer allows for some real intimacy with his heroes, and at times I wish Dillard had let us further into the private dramas of these lives. We do get to know some of them fairly well: Clare Fishburn loses his father in a freak accident, yet achieves a kind of solid citizenship that seems worth honoring; his friend John Ireland Sharp, orphaned when his entire family drowns (accident is one of the prime movers of this book), overcomes adversity to become a thoughtful scholar. I know these fictional men and others in the book, perhaps because I grew up among their real-life descendants. But Dillard's best character by far is Beal Obenchain, a murderer and outcast living in a cedar stump, who threatens Clare and provides the novel with some conventional suspense. Dillard has kept the drama of Obenchain off-center, I assume deliberately, as if she found his vitality a little too vulgar to be let loose.

By contrast, Reynolds Price bathes his latest novel in emotion.[4] I'm ashamed to admit that I've read very little of Price's work, though what I've read has been exceptionally good. This title, *Blue Calhoun*, sounds at first like something from Louis L'Amour, or perhaps

[4] BLUE CALHOUN, by *Reynolds Price*. Atheneum. $23.00.

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another sequel to *Gone with the Wind*, but the character of Bluford Calhoun has a kind of anguished wit and moral depth rare in contemporary fiction, and Reynolds Price is an extremely assured writer.

The novel is Blue's confession to his granddaughter, explaining the luckless family into which she was born. Most of the action takes place in the 1950s, in and around Raleigh, North Carolina. After World War II, Blue's alcoholism and womanizing nearly killed him and destroyed his family, whose forgiveness he has carried ever since like a guilty curse. Price seems to know something about alcoholism—he discusses it in a recent *Paris Review* interview—and Blue is a carefully observed "dry drunk," hopelessly caught in a passion for a teen-aged girl named Luna while tormented by feelings of responsibility for his long-suffering mother and his Catholic wife and daughter. What Price catches so well here is the all-consuming force of addiction, but his novel is, until its final revelations, gently elegant in style. Most of the emotion is contained within Blue, because his family has long since learned how to steel itself against feeling anything. When Blue confesses his love of the girl to his mother, she replies, "You've told me something utterly tragic—or soon to be—and all I'm thinking is, how's that lemon pie I left on the table to cool?"

Blue has a recovering addict's dark humor, referring to himself as "His cold remains," but the devastation he brings down upon his family and his nearly unsuccessful efforts to set things right give the book a genuine tone of sadness. My one real objection to Price's work here concerns his treatment of Blue's wife, Myra, who seems too coldly and conveniently yanked offstage. Otherwise, this is a substantial and rewarding novel.

Alice McDermott's third novel is also set in the fifties.[5] It's a small, delicately-wrought work of art that, to evoke a comparison often used when describing the work of Virginia Woolf, reads like prose poetry. Like Woolf, McDermott matches her syntax to her themes, shifting in time gracefully, though sometimes the shift caught me by surprise after it had occurred. As with Woolf, the small domestic moments, minutely observed, are everything. You might say that the protagonist in this little novel is an entire Irish Catholic family, based in Brooklyn, with one branch living in the evolving suburbs of Long Island. The latter consists of three children, a distant, hard-working father and a discontented mother. Frequently they journey to Brooklyn to visit three eccentric aunts and the woman called Momma who raised them. Aunt Veronica is a dipsomaniac, Aunt May a former nun whose marriage to a mailman named Fred provides the climactic scene of the novel, beautifully written and deeply poignant because McDermott won't let you forget how it all ends. There are more characters,

[5] AT WEDDINGS AND WAKES, by *Alice McDermott*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $19.00.

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virtually all of them given some good moment or scene, yet the novel is remarkably fluid, circling back on a few crucial events until the meaning of each has deepened. I can't begin to do justice to McDermott's style without quoting a longish passage from one of the visits to Brooklyn:

> In Momma's rooms the heat was turned up too high and the radiator dripped and hissed with the effort to sustain it.
>
> "I can't imagine," Aunt May told their mother, "how any marriage can outlast so much remembering. Every slight and insult. You remember everything."
>
> The children turned the pages of their dull magazines. "If I didn't," their mother said steadily, "I would have come back here a long time ago."
>
> The older girl rolled from her stomach to her back, her magazine held in the air. It was a new *Playbill*, but for a play that featured only three actors, and so after she'd read through their biographies and studied the list of scenes (a drawing room late one morning, afternoon of the same day, and later that evening, assuring her that time moved no faster on that stage than this one) and then had chosen from the many advertisements the restaurant she preferred—French, three steps down, with strolling violins—she'd begun studying the magazine from various angles and directions, imagining how it would appear to her if she had one eye, was half blind, was bedridden and forced to read with it held straight above her head.

Notice how this little scene wanders with the short attention span of a child not eager to hear about adult problems, then snaps into focus with the *Playbill* and the girl's private role-playing. I found moments like that on nearly every page. *At Weddings and Wakes* is an exquisite little gembox of a book.

By now you will have noted that this review, unlike McDermott's novel, more or less follows the fiction of linear time; after the fifties comes the sixties, and Susan Howatch's sixteenth book.[6] As I said at the outset, Howatch is one of the writers of whom I knew absolutely nothing when I began reading. Having read *Mystical Paths*, I now count myself a fan and look forward eagerly to reading more. This accomplished novel is both moving and fun to read—a social satire that becomes a spiritual and pyschological quest, a mystery in which, like *Oedipus Rex*, the evidence casts light upon the detective. An Author's Note tells us that "*Mystical Paths* is the fifth in a series of novels about the Church of England in the twentieth century. Each book is designed to be read independently of the others, but the more

[6] MYSTICAL PATHS, by *Susan Howatch*. Knopf. $23.00.

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books are read, the wider will be the view of the multi-sided reality which is being presented." A sixth and final novel, tantalizingly titled *Absolute Truths*, is planned.

In case you're one of those readers whose eyes cloud over at the mention of novels about practicing Christians, let me say that Howatch is not interested only in doddering priests who wince at visions of tea without milk. The Church here faces a crisis of relevance in the permissive sixties, wrestling not only with good and evil in their familiar medieval forms, but with sexuality and psychological health as conceived in the post-Freudian era. The protagonist, Nicholas Darrow, is a relatively hip young ordinand who moves in varied social circles emanating from Cambridge and Oxford, as well as the fictional Starbridge (Salisbury), where his father lives. Nick is a wonderful character—hapless and overconfident at the same time, deviously guilty and deeply hurt. It's his ambiguous obsession with the bright Oxford don, Christian Aysgarth (the name ironically echoes Bunyan) that initiates the quest and the detective mystery.

But Howatch has been even more daring in her use of the quest motif. She has convincingly introduced spiritual and demonic powers that are rarely taken seriously outside the novels of William Peter Blatty. Nick is, like his father, a psychic, a phenomenon that both troubles him and gives him delusions of gnostic power. When Aysgarth is reported dead, the question is "What became of his spirit?" And when Nick attempts to heal Aysgarth's grieving widow in a pseudo-seance, the demonic eruptions that follow seem weirdly real. Howatch's problem, of course, is how to present pre-Enlightenment spirituality in a radically post-Enlightenment world. She solves the problem somewhat as Isaac Bashevis Singer did, by allowing us room to make our own explanations for the phenomena she describes. Here, for example, is one character's psychological explanation for demonic possession: "The overpowering of the ego by chaotic forces rising out of the subconscious mind." Psychology and theology work neatly in tandem throughout the novel, informed by the writings of Michael Ramsey, who as Archbishop of Canterbury steered the Church through the difficult sixties, and Christopher Bryant, a theologian until now unknown to me.

Susan Howatch is a masterful novelist, as you can see right away in her crisp opening (reminiscent of Anthony Burgess' *Earthly Powers*):

> I had just returned from an exorcism and was flinging some shirts into the washing-machine when my colleague entered the kitchen. He was wearing his cassock, and carrying a bottle of whiskey. Beyond the window caked in city grime, sunlight blazed upon the battered dustbins in the backyard.
>
> "How was the Gothic mansion haunted by the ravishing young ghost?"

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"Non-existent. The trouble was in a council house where the previous occupant had overdosed on heroin in the lavatory."

"Ah well, that's 1988 for you . . . Drink?"

From here Nick's narrative moves back to the sixties and the central crises of his life. Howatch has him tour a society of bright young things turning on to sex and drugs (their heroin supplier is an American floozy named Dinkie). But all of Nick's preoccupations are unexpectedly flipped on their ends as the healer discovers he must heal himself. In *Mystical Paths* we see how a real novelist can take what appears to be a marginal subject and turn it into something that commands attention.

I'll skip over the seventies for lack of space and leap to the latest book by the darling and demon of American fiction in the eighties, Jay McInerney.[7] I've never been a fan of McInerney's work, but I can't tell whether that is due to the shallowness of his characters or the blinding glitter of publicity surrounding his social life. Now that I've got that off my chest, I have to report that in *Brightness Falls* he has written a substantial novel, far more expansive and affecting than anything he has done before, with enough vulgarity to be human and enough story to be rather meaningful. McInerney takes a broad social view; if Howatch's troubled institution is the Church, McInerney's is Wall Street, and also the publishing world. Russell Calloway, his very Fitzgeraldian hero, is a rising young editor at a New York publishing firm. His wife, Corrine, brings home the real bacon by working as a stockbroker. The novel opens with a birthday dinner which seems the epitome of Yuppie smugness. But McInerney sees the eighties with a glossy realism, exposing the troubles under his trendy social surfaces. Russell is a frustrated poet in whom ambition o'erleaps itself. Corrine hates her work and suffers from bulimia. Their friend, Jeff, an appallingly successful young writer, already has the heroin habit that will send him into rehab and worse. McInerney is well aware that many readers will be inclined to dismiss his characters as rich brats. Anticipating this, he has Jeff paraphrase the opening of Fitzgerald's "The Rich Boy": "Begin with an individual and you'll find you've got nothing but ambiguity and compassion; if you intend violence, stick with the type."

The novel wouldn't work if McInerney didn't expose their delusions. But the best thing he has done is to move beyond their individual and domestic troubles, and show us the broader economic picture. We see Russell and Corrine at work, and we see Russell's pride become vaulting ambition while Corrine retains enough compassion to volunteer at a homeless shelter. The story really takes off when Russell and a few vividly-drawn allies (editors, writers, corpo-

[7] BRIGHTNESS FALLS, by *Jay McInerney*. Knopf. $23.00.

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rate raiders and junk-bond kings) attempt the hostile takeover of the publishing company. McInerney convinces me that he knows about this world, using its detail the way John LeCarré uses the petty bureaucracy of spying for verisimilitude. We quickly realize that it's all leading up to the October crash of 1987, and the novel's suspense comes from our curiosity about who will survive and who will get their just deserts.

As an elegy for the eighties, *Brightness Falls* is only mildly affecting, but it's a suspenseful novel about particular people and classes of people, some of whom learn from their mistakes. I find it especially encouraging that McInerney has done the hard work of researching Wall Street, something most contemporary fiction writers wouldn't dream of doing. He provides a better epitaph for the eighties in one of his final scenes. It was written in the sixteenth century by Thomas Nashe:

> Rich men, trust not in wealth,
> God cannot buy you health;
> Phisick himselfe must fade.
> All things to end are made,
> The plague full swift goes bye;
> I am sick, I must dye:
> Lord, have mercy on us.
>
> Beauty is but a flowre,
> Which wrinckles will devoure,
> Brightnesse falls from the ayre,
> Queenes have died yong and faire,
> Dust hath closde Helens eye.
> I am sick, I must dye:
> Lord, have mercy on us.

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DENNIS SAMPSON

The Authentic Voice

HART CRANE'S *THE BRIDGE*, Theodore Roethke's *The Lost Son*, Randall Jarrell's *The Lost World* all describe the spirit in exile, a theme that, at least since Whitman, has run through most American poetry. These poets sought some clarifying vision that would give meaning to our lives, if we showed an inclination to listen. How willing are contemporary poets? Can we find the authentic voice?

There is one remarkably beautiful poem in Susan Mitchell's second book,[1] called "Cities," a fairly long and perfectly rendered song of the disaffected self that rushes, turns back on itself, gathers force, pouring itself out into one of the understatements of the year:

> When I reached the construction site, it was boarded up,
> the faces of movie actresses and handsome men
> drinking scotch peeled from the faces
> of movie actresses and men in red automobiles

"Cities" is powerfully evocative of what she saw in Paris and Rome, as she reconsidered the distance between herself and the city where she was born, and between who she is and who she once was. Unfortunately, the stoical persona associated with so much contemporary poetry, with its presumption of final knowledge and infatuation with despair ("The mind builds a house," Emerson said, "then the house shuts it out"), infuriatingly blasé when what is really needed is engagement, holds up a strong hand against further exploration in other poems. None have the unpremeditated eloquence of "Cities," although there are traces of it in "Mosaic, Probably Narcissus," "From a Book of Prophets," and several others. The sense of pursuit is never equalled again. Given so little choice or chance to be chosen (Jarrell's famous analogy of poetic inspiration to being hit by lightning requires a willingness to make of ourselves a target), the poet ends up awkwardly directing things and looking bewilderingly around for something significant to hold on to:

> There is a bar I go to when I'm in Chicago
> which is like a bar I used to go to when I lived in New York.
> There are the same men racing toy cars

[1] RAPTURE, by *Susan Mitchell*. HarperPerennial. $11.00p.

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at a back table, the money passing so fast
from hand to hand, I never know who's winning, who's losing,
only in the New York bar the racers sport Hawaiian shirts
while in the Chicago bar they wear Confederate caps . . .
"A Story"

This is prose. The story which the title implies will be told is never developed. What is most troubling is that Mitchell does not seem to know when she is posing. Anecdotal poems like "Bus Trip" and "Feeding the Ducks at the Howard Johnson Motel" dissolve into wordiness and self-referential asides, a problem in her poetry that finally has very little to do with craft and everything to do with the illusion that poetic truth is available only through certain attitudes. Mitchell has cultivated a kind of off-hand approach, offering considerable commentary, pulling away, opening one door, looking in, moving on to another. Who set this precedent for her? When, in "Self-Portrait with Two Faces," she is given the opportunity to consider a night sky above the ocean, she defers:

I lay on the cold
sand and looked up. At first I had romantic
thoughts. There is no need
to describe these. Everyone has them.
Then came strange, terrifying thoughts, so
peculiarly my own, I couldn't possibly
say what they were.

While the above assertions are largely denied later on, the use of diversive tactics ("But / by this time the story / is retracting itself, suddenly shy") and an attitude of nonchalance keep "Self-Portrait with Two Faces" from becoming anything other than an interesting admission of sorts, despite the strong ending.

"All truths wait in all things," Whitman said. Susan Mitchell is victimized by the assumption that this might be otherwise, and her language suffers. Generally, when she falls back on transitional words and phrases (*once, but, sometimes, when I'm six, and it happens*, among others) we know that she has entered the lesser kingdom of dull contemplative prose and will have difficulty finding her way up over the castle walls. That's too bad, since Mitchell has talent and obviously knows what to do when, as in "Cities," the voice of necessity begins to sing: she gets out of the way, resisting the impulse to interfere. Her habit of interspersing narrative with flaccid asides ("I let myself go with a fantasy," "Now, my mother is the kind of person," "I never would have guessed, not even in a million years," "You know how / it is when you're speaking," "But I'll tell you something that is ironic") is maddening, the symptom of a problem which she must resolve

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before she can hope to write consistently well. And I believe eventually she will.

The poems in Gerald Barrax's fourth collection[2] are uttered with refreshing mastery, as if we had suddenly come into a country where all the carriages bearing royalty through the streets, all the empty palaces and garishly ornamented steeds had been banished in favor of a life of simplicity:

> The smallest bones in Helen's body
> Don't dampen amplitudes as they should,
> And, deep inside, her ears hurt. Her drums
> Are set at such exquisite tension against my music
> That a few measures from a sonata
> Or a lyric I thought I'd forgot
> Invites someone I loved or wanted
> Forty years ago to take me back, away,
> While she is distracted by threshold pain,
> And makes the house tremble with her complaint
> Against the noise,
> However quietly my deference plays for her.
>
> "Haunted House"

Thus begins a poem (echoing, however unintentionally, D.H. Lawrence's beautiful poem "Piano") that is representative of his rich and thoroughly believable voice, devoid of posturing and pretentious exclamations. Barrax's persona is friendly, affirmative, nostalgic, gently considering—a middle-aged father drawn to talk about his daughters, his passion for jazz and classical music, within a setting of an American residential suburb. "Not Often Near Such Water" has him and his family at an Atlantic beach, the poet fluctuating between descriptions of the immediate scene ("I always swim parallel to shore. / No farther out than where I lose bottom.") and a memory of himself at sea, crossing the Pacific in 1955. He paddles out on his surfboard, glancing back at "the little gathering / Looking out my way."

> Quietly, quietly I will myself to match the ocean's ease
> And abandon the surfboard. To swim to that small crowd.
> The ocean seems to be holding its breath too,
> Deciding.
> I see that I'm not afraid.

The singular achievement in *Leaning Against the Sun* is "Cello Poem," which appears last, shifting gears three times, from "Another

[2] LEANING AGAINST THE SUN, by *Gerald Barrax*. The University of Arkansas Press. $19.95; $8.95.

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guest room on the poetry circuit" to "Yesterday a woman whom I will always love drove / twenty-seven miles to hear me read her poem" to listening to the radio when he was a child, after which begins a long and powerful meditation on his obsession with the cello, an erotic love poem of flesh-and-blood so artfully told one scarcely knows the difference between the cello at the end and the remembered lovers:

> we kissed away the difficulty we declared
> marriage would give us time to solve: kissed standing
> and lying bodies grinding with such ferocity I'd ride
> midnight streetcars home still engorged groin aching
> from her sharp pubic arch a miracle we didn't become
> merely virgin parents on those winter evenings she
> slouched to the edge of the chair before me her wide
> skirt at ease to be kissed her endless legs molding me
> into the shape of her cello

Shorter poems are less effective, the natural cadence hard to sustain. Barrax is best in poems of a page or more where he has only a dim notion of where he is going, since he has as well an instinctive grasp of narrative. One wonders what he could do with, say, a book-length poem using personas ("Where It Came From" shows him capable of delivering convincing monologues using another's voice), rhyme, as in sections of "Cello Poem," and narrative. Where will he go from here? The answer perhaps lies with the conclusion of "Not Often Near Such Water":

> Uneasy, admiring, they see how calm I am, how
> far I've come.
> This time, we will all go deeper into the forest.

Gerald Stern's reputation owes much to his second book, *Lucky Life*, a beautifully coherent, urban song of the self that seems born of some deep pain, one never specifically identified but which has inspired this writer to proclaim a state of astonishment for himself. *Lucky Life* is memorable, but in his seventh volume, *Bread without Sugar*,[3] his characteristically eccentric obsession with minutiae and perpetually ecstatic voice have come to dominate. What is lost is necessity and control. It is as if Stern were in possession of a single truth and refused to be talked out of it.

> I cut a stick for my love. It is too early
> to clear the yard. I pick some lilac. I hate them
> dying on the vine. I plan my assault

[3] BREAD WITHOUT SUGAR, by *Gerald Stern*. W.W. Norton. $18.95.

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on the dead maple. I will tie some rope
to the rotting side and pull it down so I can
cut it limb from limb without destroying
the phone connections from one state to another
or smashing the new tomato plants and ruining
the asters. She is walking from place to place . . .
"I Would Call It Derangement"

Too many poems begin like this, the "I" undefined, one-dimensional, habitually given to automaton-like descriptions and steering instinctively away from any suggestion or any hint that the subject could be other than the self (in "Grinnell, Iowa" the appearance of somebody other than the poet comes as a huge relief). Why is this so? We sense the human depth when he looks long and sympathetically at others and doesn't resort to the frenetic banter of one desperately in need of focus. (It is one thing to lean on stream-of-consciousness and another to say everything that comes into your head.) Those who have loved Stern's poems for their recklessness and incantatory cataloguing, for their sudden shifts, as if he were attempting to put the world together through snapshots, will find much here to admire, a good many lines worth citing ("It is a great weariness, isn't it, / almost a kind of sorrow, / getting up before you're ready / because of some babbling in the maples"), especially when inspired by anger or contempt for the self—defeated in his efforts to be joyous—emotions we don't think of when we think of Stern's poems. What could be more noble than wanting to be included "among the happy poets," as Roethke said? Yet those hoping to be won over again by Stern's poetry, which was once urgent and controlled, will be disappointed. *Bread without Sugar* is an escape from, not a clarification of the self.

One would be remiss to put Jean Burden in a class with Marianne Moore or any other major writer. But Burden does know how to make poems. A warm, likeable, and mildly eccentric mind is at work in *Taking Light from Each Other*.[4] Burden's images, in particular, are always a little surprising (". . . the book falls open / at a page where long ago / a vanished hand underscored a word with *yes*"), her observations seem filtered through a long life of looking steadily at things, her humor genuine. What enhances her central theme of loss is the anticipation at seeing death take her friends and relatives. "Even as we love, the world / is constantly passing away" she says in the title poem. The amusing perspective brought to nearly every event, the plain-spoken tone, keeps her from being maudlin. "I do not believe in a God / who bothers Himself in the trivia / of this planet" begins "Lost Word," "but / Lord, could you find me this word?" The reader is drawn through this inventory of what she has loved and endured,

[4] TAKING LIGHT FROM EACH OTHER, by *Jean Burden*. University Press of Florida. $17.95; $10.95.

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complete with childhood reveries, elegies to her mother and father, tributes to friends. "In Other People's Houses" recounts what attracts her attention: "In general, / I ignore furniture unless / it is very bad / or very old; / paintings (unless Oriental); / flower arrangements (except dried grasses); / and anything on four legs, / unless / it is a cat." "On Being Asked to Join a Communal Tub, Mt. Tamalpais" is a hilarious argument with the self, the narrator saying finally to her "Mountain host,"

> . . . forgive me.
> I am unresigned
> to waters measured and tender,
> tested by an elbow. Reflection
> has a double meaning
> and three eyes. *No.*

Jean Burden is a good poet and *Taking Light from Each Other*, coming late in her life, administers the rare cure of a calm voice.

The Burning Fields[5] by David Middleton exhibits a kind of formal writing we don't find much any more, metered verse that rhymes and exists outside what most contemporary poets have made as their home: free-verse confession. Middleton is a Southerner and his poetry seems spoken by the gentlemanly patriarch of a well-to-do Louisiana family—deferential, polite, less interested in the modern American milieu than in mythology and the history of his family, although occasionally scholarly reflection and some twentieth-century horror are thrown into the same bed together with shocking effect, as in "Emerson at Belsen."

> Yes, I have come to see them, even I,
> Sifting through these pits of lime and bone
> To find that utmost evil I deny:
> This is the Old World's doing, not my own.

One wishes he had done more of this. The regularity and neatness of iambic pentameter linked with rhyme in poem after poem is irritating after a while, even though Middleton handles it rather well. More important is that in allowing this ancient rhythm to move the poem along, he comes to seem rather arbitrary in his selection of images, as if he were someone on a shopping spree. The voice loses credibility. The poems seem rendered, not by a living human being, but by an expert on meter. His subjects recover their uniqueness when they slip out from underneath this hypnotizing beat and are depicted realistically. Of his mother he says, in "The Quiet Garden," "By seventy the

[5] THE BURNING FIELDS, by *David Middleton*. Louisiana State University Press. $14.95; $7.95.

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cancer had returned / Eating behind your nipples to the heart." At an open window, the son places his head in her "yellow arms" and waits:

> Outside, the quiet garden, still in scented sleep,
> Let in the night that led you past your pain,
> The long-closed morning-glories, far from dawn,
> Four-o'clocks folding before the cankered shade
> In which you said "please hold me" and were gone.

Moments like these would not have been possible had Middleton elected to compose other than formally. Drawn more to the rhythms of natural speech, or at least modifying this iambic pentameter line, he could have more easily overcome the resistance we all feel when encountering formal writing, critical of the least slip-up. In any event, it is worth enduring the methodical rise and fall of his line for the educated, unself-conscious company of his Southern voice and unusual approach: Middleton is a believer whose spirituality lies underneath every one of his poems. My favorite is "The Conversion of Wallace Stevens," a rare free-verse piece that says of one who made the imagination his deity:

> There must be more.
> Beyond this life, beyond this death,
> Something, which, for the mind
> Would be enough.
> All this is not enough.
> Not life, not death,
> Not what we fix with the hardest
> Most unevaded gaze,
> Nor anything of God we can conceive.

It ends: "The mind itself can never be enough."

As one who has gone against the contemporary grain, often to the point of employing language William Cullen Bryant would have found to his liking, by using themes of reverence and devotion, Middleton deserves an audience. He is a true outsider.

While Jean Garrigue can hardly be thought of as contemporary (she died in 1972, of Hodgkin's disease) her work, with its big embrace and unfailingly precise descriptions, sets an extremely high standard, as this selection[6] of her poetry clearly shows. One is awed by her capacity to sustain, often at great length, poems which seem to promise little. Her poetic impulse is lyrical and, at least in her early work, exaggerated rhetorical gestures take the place of her true voice, which doesn't fully appear until *Country without Maps*, published in

[6] SELECTED POEMS, by *Jean Garrigue*. The University of Illinois Press. $27.50; $12.95.

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1964. Phrases like "the abashed resentments of the ego," "universalists of sight," "boyhood of the implacable maelstrom," "ditches of rash thought" permeate the poetry of her first four books, whereas the self, in full flower from 1964 on, is often limited to theatrical expressions: "I hailed and cried," "I saw and wept, my cheek did burn," "I suffered her to disappear." Nevertheless, one might suspect that the straining after eloquence (nothing could be less promising than to begin a poem with "Beasts of the Antipodes spring down! / And hoydens leap like lions over beaches!") would ultimately be set aside, since there are many dazzling fragments ("What tyranny imposed this pride / That caused love's gift to be denied / And our destroying features to / Cast perpetually on its brow / The glass accepting no leaves now?") and even whole poems. "Homage to Ghosts" and the excellent "A Figure for J.V. Meer" show Garrigue capable of writing like no one else.

And the strainings *are* set aside, along with the deep influence of Dylan Thomas whose mystical diction had a disturbing effect on her. It is with *Country without Maps* that Garrigue's language suddenly surrenders to her inevitable voice, full-bodied, penetratingly clear, always in pursuit. "Amsterdam Letter," echoing Elizabeth Bishop, is a typically successful poem, generously restrained. It begins,

> Brick distinguishes this country,
> And broad windows—rather, rectangles
> Of wide and glittering scope—
> And cabbages,
> Cattle a specialty, and cheese, storks—if they are not all dead
> Or abandoned—and flowers, oh, flowers!
> Some say as well, quick humor.
> Is it a specimen of humor that a cabdriver proposes to marry me?

By now Garrigue has managed to bring out completely a voice at once formal, passionate and concise. In "Cracked Looking Glass" she pauses to take stock of her life as a writer, in a self-examination as severe as it is forgiving. "And if you postured in the looking glass," she admits, "I made it for you, I held the witchery up / For you to see the secret life I guessed." "We were what we are" she weirdly observes, then finishes

> Cease and be still. The pain is elsewhere.
> It's in the breaking face the clouds give to the moon
> And in the flower that leans upon the air
> Pouring its full life out into its scent.

One witnesses not only evolution of technique, a growing faith in her emerging voice and her way of seeing, but also the slow unfolding of a personality resigned to the passage of time, and to loss, and our

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bewildering inability to do anything about it. In her accomplished poem, "After Reading *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," Garrigue, haunted still by Thomas' melodious language, yet as if in deference to him, speaks passionately of the transformation all of us undergo in order to survive ("Change and loss was what the brook cried / That she heard in the night when the clock whirred"), and in "Studies for an Actress," a heartbreaking conclusion to her work, she explains as if speaking to herself:

> She prays then to change
> If it's in changing that things find repose.
> She prays to praise. She prays to be
> Condensed now to one desire
> As if it were very life performing her.

Refusing late in life to be reduced to bitterness by hard truths, never forsaking spontaneity for the clean little citadel embraced by other formalists, Jean Garrigue wrote poems that are a testament to the will of one who persevered with dignity and grace.

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FELIX STEFANILE

Of Animals That Talk and Words That Bite

IN ONE OF HIS NOTES TO *THE FABULISTS FRENCH* Norman R. Shapiro observes, not too defensively, that the craft associated with the ancient little genre of the verse fable, its verbal and metrical virtuosities, may distract from the goal of that form, moral instruction. He follows immediately with a quotation from Stanislas-Jean Boufflers, a nineteenth-century fabulist whom he includes in this hefty anthology:[1] "the fable is the only virgin in the whole universe whom we prefer a little clothed." The question of art that delights as it teaches is an old one. A brief excerpt from "The Raven and the Snake," by Jean-Antoine de Baïf (1532–1589), indicates a perhaps too peppy execution of the poet's business:

> . . . . *Du bec la beca.*
> *Elle se reueille bequee:*
> *Et s'eueillant s'est rebequee:*

As usual, earlier French texts do not show accents. If one knows that *bec* is beak, one hardly needs a translation to sense that this is an incident of beak, peck, and re-pecking. It is the dozing snake (of a preceding line) who has been bitten awake, recoils, and bites back. We can also note the extra sonic dividend of the *eueill* of the related verb forms, in pert parallel. All of this happens in three lines.

I write "perhaps" at the close of my first paragraph, about a poet's jingling and jangling, because the fable in verse offers its own special strategies for inviting recitation. In today's sometimes seething discussions of what makes poetry memorable, we need a little reminding: poetry, like language, originated in a world without books, without paper, and without print. With talk comes listening, and in poetry, more focusedly than in prose, listening too is an art. To be perfectly clumsy about it, poetry that is memorable must also be memorizable. Deprived of mnemonic device, tune, and echo, the memorable cannot be. Shapiro's good-humored caveat about craft, and hyper-craft in poetry, has genuine point for the modern reader who wants poems to stay on the printed page, and keep quiet. In ancient times, those

[1] THE FABULISTS FRENCH: Verse Fables of Nine Centuries, trans., with Prologue and Notes, by *Norman R. Shapiro*. Woodcuts by *David Schorr*. University of Illinois Press. $49.95.

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epochs of preliteracy, poems were not read, but heard. The silent poem of today is something else.

Let Eugène Guillevic, born in 1907 and incisively represented in this book that spans the centuries, drive my point home. In 1981, his talent still ripe, he published *Fabliettes*. Note the sing-song crispness, the arch repeats, the rhythmic departures and returns of the original French, and of Shapiro's excellent English version. (I particularly praise Shapiro's "mouseliness" for *en souris*.)

Fabliette de la Souris

Une souris de bonne race
Qui n'avait pas été en classe
Et n'avait jamais rien appris
Ni d'un maître, ni de sa mère,

Savait pourtant ce qu'il faut faire
Pour se comporter en souris,

Et devint ainsi douce chair
Pour un matou de bonne race
Qui n'avait pas été en classe
Et lui aussi savait y faire.

The Mouse

A mouse of proper pedigree,
Unschooled, untutored by her mother—
Or, to be sure, by any other—
Versed all the same in mouseliness,

Knew what a mouse was meant to be;
And so, indeed, as one might guess,

Became a tasty fricassee
For tomcat quite untutored too,
But who, well-pedigreed no less,
Knew what a cat was meant to do.

The spryness of such poetry is for the ear, the listening ear.

The editor and author of this compilation spent five years on the work, reading, researching, translating, corresponding, checking the texts. The result is big, expensive, and fun, a lap-size book that combines the mysteries of a grab bag with the pleasant curiosities of a museum. Nine centuries of poetry are represented within these covers, including original French texts en face. Starting with Marie de

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France (twelfth century), and ending with Gomar (Jean-Charles Talmant, 1982), the pages are a parade of short biographies, poems, footnotes rich with witty clues, bibliography, indexes, and woodcut illustrations of a decent size—by noted artist David Schorr—that scamper, friendly beasts, in and out of the material. The format of the page has been studiously designed to outwit the weightiness of so much sourcing, with neat spacing, well-marked guidelines and comfortable margins; the effect is not crowding, but pacing. It is technically, of course, one of our sturdy benefits of computer printing, and yet it reminds me most of Walter de la Mare's marvelous anthology classic of yesteryear, *Come Hither,* that stunning population count of the English lyric. All of this is important to state because Professor Shapiro's collection has similar varied uses, as browser's paradise, reader's companion, and reliable safe house for diligent, fascinated students.

The Fabulists French shows that the verse fable runs, like an irrepressible fugue, through French poetry. The importance of Marie de France cannot be underestimated, either in the history of the fable or of French literature, coming as she did, at the dawn—but other names crop up, and not only that of Jean de La Fontaine, fable's permanent shooting star. Often generously staged here are such modern figures as Gabriel Audisio, Jacques Prévert, Jean Anouilh, Eugène Guillevic, previously noted, and several other authors more familiar to us for their other productions. We also get fables, over the generations, in patois, in dialect, and in the Francophone idioms of the colonies. This poetic form seems to have attracted the efforts of members of various classes, the country boy as well as the courtier, the printer as well as the countess. One gets the distinct impression that, from period to period, the fable is a minor but steady intimate of the general culture. Another note: it seems clear that for many poets the fable provided a means of "showing one's stuff," serving a function much like that of the sonnet in this age or that.

Our sub-text here has been that of Aesop, all along, and of his Greek and Latin purveyors, Babrius and Phaedrus. It is the longevity of some of these stories, in their shifting guises, that may be offering to tell us something not only about archetype (old fashioned term!), but human nature. Jean-Antoine de Baïf's lazy cricket suffers his classic winter some time after 1575 and before 1597. In 1978 the Francophone African poet Yves-Emmanuel Dogbé presents us with a lazy cricket who suffers his famine in the summer, before the winter has set in. A kind-hearted ant offers him food to tide him over, but the cricket is too proud to confess his true state. The moral has been switched; the lesson concerns pride. This is but one example of the resilience of the fable. Ideas submerge, reappear, change. Styles change from long tales to short, and vice versa. The octosyllabic couplet generally reigns, but there are variations galore.

A charming, and wicked example of the ease with which the fable has been able to cut through social categories, while at the same time

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testing stylistic limits, is Edme Boursault (1638–1701). Born in the boondocks, Champagne, and with small credits of either class or education, he as a teen-ager won the patronage of a rake, and became a favorite of high society in Paris. Among his numerous accomplishments was the introduction of the fable into theater, to the consternation and delight of critics. His lively mind was capable of straying from the traditional anti-feminine convention of the genre. The females presented in the following poem are neither frivolous nor sinful:

L'Ecrevisse et Sa Fille

L'Ecrevisse une fois s'étant mis dans la tête
Que sa Fille avoit tort d'aller à reculons,
Elle en eut sur le champ cette réponse honnête:
"Ma Mère, nous nous ressemblons.
J'ai pris pour façon de vivre
La façon dont vous vivez:
Allez droit si vous pouvez,
Je tâcherai de vous suivre."

The Crayfish and Her Daughter

A mother crayfish took a mind
To criticize her daughter's rearward walk:
"Face forward, love . . . Backside behind . . ."
The daughter smiled: "You're one to talk!
I do as I've been taught. I try
To be like you as best I may,
And follow you in every way.
Walk forward—if you can—and so will I."

Of the seventy authors in *The Fabulists French* five are women. Professor Shapiro, always alert to his material, pauses richly for Madame Ganlis (1746–1830), whose *Herbier Moral, ou Recueill de Fables Nouvelles* (1801), is "apparently the first (albeit slim) volume of fables by a French woman writer since Marie de France." Her book is also, he goes on to say, "not a mere echo of her male predecessors and contemporaries." Of interest here is the attempt by Madame Ganlis to eliminate the fable's tendency to portray animal treachery and mayhem, which, she passionately explains, is unsuitable for children. Reconstruction, if not deconstruction, is at work in her: she substitutes plants for animals in most of her poems. Space does not permit equitable quoting of her work here.

Certainly Madame Joliveau de Segrais (1756–1830) is deserving of mention as the creator of "one of the shortest bona fide examples in the literature, if not the shortest":

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L'Aigle et le Ver

L'Aigle disait au Ver, sur un arbre attrapé:
"Pour t'élever si haut, qu'as-tu fait?" "J'ai rampé."

The Eagle and the Worm

Eagle spied worm atop a tree and, calling,
"How did you climb so high?" he asked. "By crawling."

Here our common treasury of proverb, fable, and epigram seems consummately synthesized.

The achievement of Jean de La Fontaine (1621–1695) has been too thoroughly recounted the world over to require much comment from this reviewer. Suffice it to say that he is represented here by ten poems, ably rendered by Shapiro in sprightly, highly readable and recitable English. We can also check out the work of Gilles Corozet (1510–1586), notable for the way he freed up the classical octosyllabic line into shorter and longer verses, thus providing La Fontaine a preview for his own experiments in *vers libre*, poetry loosened up, which is what the French originally meant by that term, long before the free verse poets of America turned the phrase into another thing in the twentieth century. As we have seen though, the romance continues apace in French literature; the fable will not go away. In 1932 the annual Grand Prix of Literature of the French Academy was awarded, for his total *oeuvre*—including a dozen books of fables—to Franc-Nohain (Maurice-Etienne Legrand, 1873–1934). As Shapiro elucidates in his head note on the man, Franc-Nohain is a direct and unabashed descendant of La Fontaine, making use of the style, subject, and tone of the master, to which he adds his own originality, along with, to use Shapiro's term, the "industrial revolutionization" of the fable. We get a wicked manufacturer of rubber snails, a revolt of the elevators, an orchestra conductor who, unable to make a decent living in music, takes a position as a traffic cop, and, with baton, leads the traffic furiously. What follows is a glimpse at a soccer ball, most proud and overbearing.

Le Ballon de Football, ou le Moyen de Parvenir

Par un magistral coup de pié
Envoyé
Sous la traverse
Du camp adverse,
Le ballon de football Association,
Plein d'une morgue ostentatoire,

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Voudrait-il pas nous faire croire
Que, grâce à ce suprême bond,
Dont il prétend s'attribuer la gloire,
Sa valeur personnelle emporta la victoire?
Ton orgueil est hors de raison,
Sans le pied vaillant qui te pousse . . .

The Soccer Ball, or How to Succeed in Life

Sent flying into the opponent's net,
A soccer ball
Has the gall—
O grand and glorious *vedette*!—
To think that he's the one who did it all,
By dint of personal endeavor—
Just one gigantic leap—with never
A thought about the kicking foot behind him.
And so we find him
Taking full credit for *his* victory—
Yes, his and his alone . . . My friend, your pride
Is rather on the inappropriate side:
Without that foot, what would you be—

It is a pity not to reproduce the whole forty-five-line poem, but Franc-Nohain continues in the same vein to his fitting moral conclusion, that some folks, in order to advance, let themselves *be kicked in the butt repeatedly*.

We have then, in *The Fabulists French*, not only literary history, but a clearly detailed history of culture in one of its steadiest aspects, the verse fable. At a time when some talented younger American poets, enough of them in number to make a difference, are moving in the direction of narrative, "the expansive poem," and out of the prison of anecdote and topicality, where free verse lyric seems to languish, along comes a book that is essentially a foreign text, to indicate the age-old wisdom of "the narrative that will not be hurried," and that can be read—safe from local program or ideology—with a clear conscience. I hope that American poets will visit Shapiro's gallery and museum. That the book is also a treasury to be ransacked by grown-ups playing at being children, and children playing at being grown-ups—a characteristic of all good "story books"—is related to, yet gets beyond verse fable. Norman R. Shapiro reminds us, with magisterial flourish, that poetry can be not only thoughtful and introspective, but thought-provoking and listener-friendly, and that a good book of poems can bring the special intimacy of a company hearing a story, away from the sacrosanct privacy of the study. I wish the French verse fable in English good fortune.

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MARK JARMAN

The Bible as Literature

MY TITLE REFERS TO THE ATTEMPT IN HIGHER EDUCATION during the past twenty years or so to treat the Bible as a text that can be read like a novel or a poem. Many universities have such a course, usually as part of the English literature curriculum. Among its enrollees it sometimes includes students who believe the Bible is the revealed word of God and cannot be considered as literature at all; they spend the semester contesting the professor's approach. Years ago when such a course was considered at Vanderbilt University where I teach there was opposition among the English faculty to teaching the Bible as literature. Today we offer a course entitled "The Bible in Literature," which charts the influence of the Bible on Western literature and art, as well. It is one of those courses one wishes every student of literature would take, along with a course in Greek, Roman, and Norse myths. Fundamentalist students still enroll in it; they are able to quote chapter and verse, but unable to understand that when one speaks of myth in the Bible, one means story and especially those stories that have defined Western culture through its literature. As long as the United States remains a country influenced by a Judeo-Christian tradition along with, I must add, an unbending religious attitude that regards any analysis of a sacred text as a sacrilege, the debate about how the Bible will be examined will continue. Robert Alter acknowledges this debate and the animus to literary criticism of the Bible in his most recent book.[1] His subject is the Hebrew Bible and he is at the forefront of those critics who treat it as a work of literature created by many hands to exist as a coherent whole.

Alter has chosen to adopt Harold Bloom's term, the Hebrew Bible, to separate the original books from those added by the Christian church. The composition of the Christian Bible suggests that the Old Testament is completed in the New. This is how Christians have always read the Hebrew Bible; it is even suggested by the way in which reported statements of Jesus appear to refer back to the older texts as one long prophetic preparation for their fulfillment in the life of Christ and the aftermath of his death and resurrection. But Alter makes it clear that the Hebrew Bible is an end in itself and should be treated as such. Alter also contrasts himself and his fellow literary critics with the nineteenth century scholars who, in a search for

[1] THE WORLD OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE, by *Robert Alter*. Basic Books. $23.00.

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origins, tended to atomize the Bible; it is they who identified the different strains of narrative and poetic style. Where the old critics found atomies, he reports, the new find unities. He argues that "a continuous reading of the text" was surely the aim of the Bible's author-redactors. Despite numerous inconsistencies, inevitable over the Hebrew Bible's 1000 years of composition and editing, it is "a very well made omelette indeed." Its central paradigm of creator and creation has led to "underlying patterns of literary expression" in the centuries that follow its own creation.

Alter's premise is that the Bible is "literature before it is anything else." The sort of literature it most resembles is that produced by modern writers like Kafka and Beckett, in that it attempts to transcend its own literary modes of poetry and prose. Knowing the work of James Joyce as we do also helps us understand what Alter calls the "bumpiness of the text" in the Bible, the braiding of strands and the patchwork of editorial or redactorial voices with their scholarly names: J, E, P, the Deuteronomist, the Court Historian of Samuel, the Elohist. Alter's contention is that as modern readers we continue to be interested in individual authorship. Bumpiness or dissonance or discontinuity of style in the Bible has tended in the past to suggest an authorial identity for each peculiar strain. For religious fundamentalists, there is no problem: all Biblical authors are mediums for God's voice. Though Alter refrains from dealing with that intractable faith, he does argue convincingly that the Bible is a work of literary genius made to refer again and again to itself, to echo and resonate and tie together the writing of numerous creators all striving to imagine the imagination of God. Reading it this way is not meant to detract from the Bible's sacredness.

The World of Biblical Literature is not nearly as thorough and focused as Alter's two major books, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* and *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. Rather it is a collection of essays and reviews, edited into nine chapters, and suffers here and there from redundancy. However, it is a good general overview of the ideas of Alter and other recent critics who consider the Bible to be a literary work.

Alter traces this new literary approach to the Bible, taken by himself and critics like David Damrosch and Gabriel Josipovici, to Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* and in particular to its first chapter, "Odysseus' Scar." There Auerbach describes the difference between the Homeric poems and the epic writing of the Bible. Auerbach notes that Biblical narrative is "fraught with background" and contrasts it with the way in which *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, though detailed, are basically foregrounded: "they contain no teaching and no secret meaning." Although the teaching and meaning implied in scripture are understood by many believers to be the essence of the Bible, Auerbach points out that part of the secret is the way in which Biblical figures like Abraham, Isaac, Saul and David develop and are presented as

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complicated, sometimes contradictory characters. Though presented laconically, they change.

The Bible's parsimony with words, Alter contends, makes every word matter, especially in literary terms. He closely examines the word-play consistently evident in the Hebrew text. Although the Biblical authors, he writes, "sought to use literature to go irrevocably beyond itself . . . they could not avoid producing in their work an enchanting affirmation of the free-playing logic of literary expression." As an example, he turns to the passage in Genesis where Sarah learns she will give birth in old age. He notes that the baby's eventual name, Isaac, referring to laughter, recalls Sarah's inward laughing when she hears the news of her imminent conception. She wonders not only at her husband's age, but at her own withered body and asks if it is possible to experience pleasure. The word she uses for pleasure implies not only the Edenic state of childbearing, but "abundant moisture" as well and thus is clearly sexual. When the angel reports Sarah's news to Abraham, he omits her comment both about sexual pleasure and her husband's advanced age, and mentions only Sarah's disbelief that she will bear a child. Even the medieval exegete Rashi, Alter says, saw this angelic discretion as promoting domestic harmony. Alter adds that it is done with literary tact as well.

One of the most interesting points Alter makes is how the Biblical authors understood that the literal when incorporated into a text that is going to be taken figuratively will tend to adapt itself to its symbolic or metaphorical context. He mentions Goliath's armor, described Homerically and with the same attention to detail, as a satire of materialism. The milch cows that return the ark from the Philistines to the Jews, described in 1 Samuel 6:12, are said to be lowing on their way to Beth-Shemesh. A touch of verisimilitude? Alter agrees that the Biblical author would have delighted in that sort of detail, though it violates his laconic nature. The cows low because their udders are full of milk and their calves left behind in the Philistine dwelling of Ekron; Alter hears in their desire to nurse their young the story of Samuel's birth to Hannah, another barren woman, who prays to be blessed with a baby and then suckles him until he is weaned. Even more ingenious and brilliant is his reading of the story of Jacob and Esau and the mess of pottage or lentil stew. Through word-play that combines Esau's hunger to eat the red stew and the epithet, "Edom," suggesting redness, associated with him afterwards, much in the legacy of these two rivals is suggested, including blood, sacrifice, and murder.

The Bible is obviously an allusive book. Though Alter does not mention this, the prophecies that are said to be fulfilled throughout the Christian Bible can be thought of as allusions themselves. But allusion as it occurs in the Hebrew Bible is not merely reference back or forward; it is essentially literary and embedded in the diction. Job's rage against his own birth echoes and negates the opening of Genesis. The little ark that carries the baby Moses recalls Noah's ark. Alter pays

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special attention to the way in which the story of Ammon and Tamar alludes to Joseph and his brothers. Ammon, about to rape Tamar, sends everyone out of the room in the same language Joseph uses when he is about to reveal himself to his brothers in Egypt. The blood on Joseph's coat of many colors is refigured in the virginal blood staining Tamar's coat when she flees Ammon's room. Alter asserts that "allusion was a natural means of reinforcing ideological continuity across schools and eras." Yet the way in which it is done argues for aesthetic design as a concern paramount to the revelation of God.

Alter implies that his sort of criticism, a kind of close reading or textual explication, is actually part of a tradition of midrash, "the great chain of exegesis" of the Hebrew Bible. He also contrasts his approach with deconstructionists and other post-structuralists who would deny any authoritative reading and condemn interest in the Bible as politically retrograde. The fact is that Alter does see his critical pursuit as a way of understanding the Bible's transcendent element. He argues for the validity of his criticism not only with opponents like Jonathan Culler, but with those religious scholars who might dismiss his reading as merely secular. Alter always argues for the literary, but I believe he would like to have his interpretations included among the midrashim. He cannot really have this, because though he believes the Bible is artfully contrived, he also believes that like all literature it is open-ended. If God is the contriver, then of course the contrivance is artful. But open-endedness is not a quality one associates with God.

The book's most lively chapter is the one in which Alter has adapted a review he wrote for *Commentary* of Harold Bloom's *The Book of J*. He criticizes Bloom's theory that the author of a major strand of Genesis was a woman especially because Bloom has based it on a recent translation by David Rosenberg. Alter finds Rosenberg's translation clumsy and inaccurate. At the same time he shakes his head over Bloom's naïveté in being taken in by Rosenberg's translation and wonders archly just how rusty Bloom's Hebrew must be. I have to admit my own frustration in that I do not read Hebrew and cannot test Alter's claims against my own ear. Still, he makes a good argument that Bloom's theory is wishful thinking and not the product of broad and deep knowledge like the similar theory of Samuel Butler that the Homer of *The Odyssey* was a woman. Butler translated both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and could speak with authority about their differences. Butler's theory had as much to do with the idea of the feminine in his time, of course, as Bloom's does in his. Alter simply asks why the author or authors of J could not understand the psychology of female characters, like Eve or Sarah, if Tolstoy or Flaubert could. In addition, Alter finds Bloom's theory is flawed by his Romantic desire to locate an "individual author of genius" for some of the greatest writing in Genesis. As Alter makes his case for the authorship of the Bible as the work of many individuals, it appears

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increasingly that he sees it as something like a cathedral, constructed over centuries by anonymous craftsmen and -women. But he does give Bloom his due, agreeing that J and Shakespeare are, in Bloomian terms, the two strongest writers of the Western tradition. Against them all other writers struggle, belated and energized.

Alter is at his best when he is concentrating on a fine but crucial point of literary technique. His chapter on poetry recapitulates a point he makes about Biblical verse in his book *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. Explaining that the King James version of the Bible does not make the verse clear, because it runs it all together, he concedes that the Hebrew version does the same thing. It was the eighteenth-century Anglican Bishop Robert Lowth who discovered or rediscovered the central informing convention of Biblical poetry—the parallelism of its "members" as Lowth called them or "versets" as they are called by Alter. These are parts of dyadic or triadic lines that make up passages of Biblical poetry. Their parallelism is rarely a simple matter of synonymous restatements. Because it is not, scholars have been confused at times and in their confusion inclined to read a coherent piece of poetry as a series of fragments by different hands. Alter points out that there is often progression in Biblical parallels or what he calls "narrative momentum." He gives as an example a passage from Isaiah 26:17: "Like a pregnant woman whose time draws near, / she trembles, she screams in her birth pangs." Here he sees not only the more concrete and focused statement following the more abstract one, typical of Biblical poetry, but a marvelously compressed rendering of labor and delivery. There is also a pattern of "focusing, heightening, or specification of ideas, images, actions, and themes, from one verset to the next." For example, "if a city is destroyed in the first verset, it is turned into a heap of rubble in the second." The subtlety and wit of the Biblical authors when employing this convention is displayed in the triumphal song of the Israelite women: "Saul has smitten his thousands, / David, his tens of thousands." As we know, Saul is offended by this comparison, though it could be taken as a simple matter of intensification, called for by the convention: numbers always increase from one verset to the next. But Alter assures us that if offense is not intended, still the people, who are enamored of David, are allowed to show their favoritism through the convention.

Alter concludes by stating that his criticism and "the attempt to fashion a new literary approach to the Bible" are not meant "to deny the truth of the Bible but to change the terms in which that truth is conceived." Despite the opposition of fundamentalists, Alter sees his real enemy as being an "endemic illiteracy" with regard to the Bible, a "twin erosion of plain knowledge of the Bible and belief in the Bible as divinely revealed truth." Alter's approach is so sensible and sensitive it seems a pity that he must answer at all to his critics or presumed critics. Yet the Bible, he admits, "remains associated with

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the idea of authority" and all that authority means, both in terms of an ultimate judge and a single creator or author. He admits that there are eloquent spokesmen among his fellow literary critics, like Donald Davie, who maintain that the Bible is beyond the pale of literary criticism. But Alter's Bible reveals "a deep continuity of human experience." The reunion, for example, of Jacob and Esau, usurper and dispossessed heir, has a complexity we find in the work of the subtlest of fictional creators, like Joseph Conrad or Henry James. Jacob, as Alter maintains, is both a forefather and a fictional character. Erich Auerbach insisted that a complete reading of the Bible must include belief, and Alter's approach does not necessarily contradict that view. He has shown, however, that composing a poem or telling a story artfully was as inspiring to the Biblical authors as the voice of God itself.

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TESS LEWIS

Delusions of Mediocrity

THE PERIPATETIC AND VERSATILE GADFLY Hans Magnus Enzensberger shows no sign of letting up in his one-man guerrilla war, begun over thirty-five years ago, on many familiar targets—the media industry, the ruling classes, polluting technology, the complacency and materialism of capitalist countries and especially Germany, and the misguided utopianism of communist countries—as well as several new ones including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Yet, largely because of his penchant for rhetorical flourishes over careful argument, the essays collected in *Mediocrity and Delusion* often merely distract when they should sting.[1]

Iconoclast though he is, attacking establishments of the right and left with equal vehemence, Enzensberger's sympathies are of a markedly pragmatic socialist bent. Highly critical of unthinking and simplistic Marxists, Enzensberger nonetheless adopts, apparently unself-consciously, a number of their preconceptions, such as an immediate and inflexible suspicion of wealthy or well-funded institutions even if their goals, like those of the IMF, do go beyond the simple protection of the economically powerful.

All too frequently in his writing, Enzensberger's acute moral judgment and compassionate but uncompromising political instincts are lost in rhetorical bluster. As long as they are not taken as the final word, hyperbole and oversimplification can reveal unexpected or forgotten truths. Enzensberger is intellectually flexible and honest enough to revise former stances and opinions when necessary. In fact, his self-deprecating titles and subtitles—"Caprice," "Palaver," "Crumbs," "Diversions"—emphasize the provisional nature of social commentary. And yet, while these often hyperbolic essays do provoke and stimulate thought, I am not convinced that they provide much more than this admittedly estimable and necessary service. Also, Enzensberger's reluctance to suggest positive alternatives to the Mammons he denounces with such stamina and conviction leaves the reader despairing that anything could possibly change for the better.

This latest collection of essays is divided thematically into three groups. The essays in part I expose general misconceptions about the state of contemporary literature and the mass media in industrialized

[1] MEDIOCRITY AND DELUSION: Collected Diversions, by *Hans Magnus Enzensberger*. Trans. by *Martin Chalmers*. Verso. $39.95.

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societies. These essays also examine the ways in which the inadequacies of education and the mind-numbing omnipotence of television have almost completely overpowered the thoughtful individual and the literary arts.

A long and uneven piece of investigative journalism into the workings of the World Bank and the IMF and their control of the global economy makes up part II. The final group of essays is directed primarily at the German government, political power, and the role of intellectuals.

Most interesting is the title essay, in which Enzensberger seeks to rehabilitate the idea of "mediocrity" in light of Germany's recent past. Those who speak condescendingly of the mediocre usually suffer from delusions of grandeur, and Enzensberger does not shrink from reminding his readers where such delusions have led Germany in the past. In no uncertain terms, he exposes the origins of the embarrassment that surrounds Germany's present "abnormal normality":

> The ban on referring to the merits of the Federal Republic is rooted in bad conscience. Of course it is a moral scandal that the Germans, one generation after the greatest crime in their history, find themselves better off than ever before, at least in the western part of the country. The least they can do in this situation, is to deny their happiness. By not wanting to admit it, they display a remnant of collective shame. On top of that there is a faint suspicion that they are living at the expense of others, whether it's the Eastern Europeans, the inhabitants of the GDR, the poor of the Third World or their own descendants.

(Ian Buruma has written about other aspects of this *Betroffenheit*, an almost paralyzing embarrassment, with greater tact in *The New York Review of Books*, but Enzensberger's style no doubt commands greater attention.) With his trademark irony, Enzensberger then goes on to praise the mediocrity of the Federal Republic, for it is contentment in a *juste milieu*, and not a fateful desire to dominate, that ensures many opportunities for individuals in an endlessly varied society.

The picture of literature that emerges from the first group of essays will be familiar to Enzensberger's readers. In short: during the bourgeois age, literature's heyday, its primary task "was to invent and manufacture historically new feelings and perceptions . . . to produce, shape, disseminate, and regulate" such "odd and unnatural" social innovations as "love," "mourning," and "happiness." But "reading is an anarchic act" and needs a certain amount of interpretive freedom to thrive. Dictatorial teaching methods and competition from "TV stars, rock musicians, feminists, journalism," etc. have all but destroyed the power of books. Enzensberger spells out his conclusion in the essay "Literature as an Institution or The Aspirin Effect." Just as an aspirin dissolves in water, becoming invisible except for a bit of

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sediment on the bottom of the glass, so contemporary literature as an institution has all but disappeared. It continues to provide our civilization with an "*éducation sentimentale et sensible*," but does so primarily in the guise of rock lyrics, advertisements, and movies. The sediment, pure literature in its traditional state, is left for those to whom literature always has mattered and always will and for that increasingly irrelevant breed: book reviewers.

Even when one disagrees with him, Enzensberger commands respect. He has won many of Germany's most prestigious awards, among them the Georg Büchner Prize in 1963, for his work as a poet, essayist, dramatist, translator, editor, librettist, anthologist, and writer of "documentary novels." Always the polemicist, he used his Büchner Prize acceptance speech as an opportunity to condemn nationalism and to warn against any possible resurgence of fascism; when awarded the Kultur Prize by the city of Nuremberg in 1967, Enzensberger caused an uproar among government officials by consigning his prize money to "people brought to court in West Germany because of their political convictions." He is very widely traveled and has lived and taught in Norway, Italy, the United States, and Cuba. His deep immersions into the culture and politics of the host countries invariably result in historically informed and politically astute essays, such as those collected in *Europe, Europe: Forays into a Continent.*

Born in Bavaria in 1929, Enzensberger grew up in Nuremberg while the Third Reich was in full swing. He was drafted into the *Volkssturm* for a short time, then worked with the RAF as a translator and bartender, all the while supporting himself by dealing on the black market. At sixteen he returned to school, later studying literature and philosophy at the universities of Erlangen and Freiburg and at the Sorbonne. In 1956 Enzensberger first read for the Gruppe 47, the distinguished association of postwar German writers and intellectuals formed out of their sense of having failed to provide any effective resistance to Nazism. He soon earned the approval of this notoriously critical group for his strongly worded essays and his brilliant, highly politicized poetry.

Enzensberger's first three volumes of poetry *verteidigung der wölfe* (*defending the wolves*, 1957), *landessprache* (*language of the country*, 1960), and *blindenschrift* (*writing for the blind*, 1964) confirmed his reputation as the most likely successor to Bertolt Brecht, who had died in 1956. Although Enzensberger's poetry is as socially and politically committed as Brecht's, it is far less ideological. Literary and colloquial idioms are interwoven in a rich lyricism, and the stylistic polish and elegant forms of Enzensberger's early poetry only occasionally lose control of his caustic irony. A selection from these three volumes, entitled *poems for people who don't read poems*, was translated and published in the United States in 1968 to respectful acclaim.

Although Enzensberger's poetry in *writing for the blind* is the most sophisticated and technically accomplished of the three volumes, he

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turned against its lyricism and subjectivity shortly after it was published, even going so far as to denounce all literary writing that did not educate and politically enlighten its readers. He had foreshadowed this turn in his poem "Ins Lesebuch für die Oberstufe" ("For a Senior College Textbook") in which he calls upon students to read railroad timetables instead of poetry as the former are much more accurate. Enzensberger confirmed this shift in 1965 by founding the influential quarterly journal of aggressive intellectual, political, and social criticism, *Kursbuch* (railroad guide or timetable).

Offered a fellowship at the Center for Advanced Studies at Wesleyan University in 1968, Enzensberger noisily resigned after three months in protest against the American ruling class in general and the Vietnam War in particular. Accepting capitalist monies, Enzensberger announced in his letter of resignation published in *The New York Review of Books*, had already compromised his intellectual integrity and, in order to confront imperialism's "less benevolent face," he planned an extended stay in Cuba.

During his year in Cuba, Enzensberger was inspired to write *Das Verhör von Habana* (*The Havana Inquiry*, 1970), a documentary play based on transcripts from the Bay of Pigs trials, as well as a long poetic sequence about the sinking of the Titanic. To create *The Havana Inquiry*, he excerpted and interpreted, translated and collated over one thousand pages of proceedings from the trials of the Cuban counterrevolutionaries that followed the disastrous invasion of 1961. But in doing so, Enzensberger suspended his usual skepticism. The play is a doctrinaire presentation of Cuba as a model of existing socialism and the Cuban bourgeois counterrevolutionaries and their Western counterparts as politically naïve, seduced by material wealth into a complacent and criminal disregard for the oppression of workers that is inherent in capitalist imperialism. Enzensberger's view of Cuba has since become more jaded. In fact, he is no longer allowed into Cuba because of subsequent diagreements with Fidel Castro.

This more pessimistic view of Cuba is evident in Enzensberger's long poem *Der Untergang der Titanic*, in which the sinking ocean liner is an apocalyptic allegory for society, and especially Havana in the 1960s and Berlin in the 1970s. Begun in 1970 and published in 1978, "The Sinking of the Titanic" is an assemblage of thirty-three highly varied "cantos" interspersed with sixteen poems that includes meditations on the relation of art to life, a modern version of Dante's *Purgatorio*, and, of course, a distinct political message (supported by actual statistics of survivors from first- and second-classes, crew, and steerage): "We are in the same boat, all of us. / But he who is poor is the first to drown."

Five years after publishing a collection of verse entitled *Mausoleum* (*Mausoleum: Thirty-seven Portraits of the History of Progress*, 1975), a series of heavy-handed but rather effective portraits of historical figures from the fourteenth to twentieth centuries, Enzensberger

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ended the sixteen-year hiatus during which he wrote, but did not publish, lyric poetry. *Die Furie des Verschwindens* (*The Fury of Disappearance*, 1980) marked his public return to lyricism and to highly subjective experience as acceptable material for poetry. Enzensberger's most recent collection of poems, *Zukunftsmusik* (*Music of the Future*, 1991), has not yet been translated into English and may prove the least amenable to translation of all his poetry. Delighting in the aural and intellectual voluptuousness of language, he uses these relatively short poems to re-evaluate clichés and apparently mundane situations. The less stringent political demands Enzensberger makes of literary writing are also evident from *TransAtlantik*, a magazine modeled on *The New Yorker* that he has edited since 1980.

Enzensberger has elaborated the apocalyptic vision of Western civilization that dominates his poetry in numerous essays, a selection of which was published here in two volumes, *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media* and *Politics and Crime*. The former collection focuses primarily on the relationship between literature and politics and on the power of the mass media to influence this relationship. The issues in the latter collection are more narrowly political, including a new theory of treason, warnings against the ecological dangers of capitalism, a look at terrorism in the past and present, and an exposé of the Cuban Communist Party.

The most notorious of these essays include "The Industrialization of the Mind," "The Aporias of the Avant-Garde," and "Commonplaces of the Newest Literature." In the first, Enzensberger warns against the media "consciousness industry" which parasitically depends upon and destroys human intelligence and creativity. In the second, he points out that the concept of an avant-garde presupposes a historical progression in culture and the arts with advances and regressions that can be calibrated much like those of an army. The third essay is often considered a literary manifesto for his former anti-poetic stance and for the German student uprisings of the late sixties. In it, Enzensberger takes up the perennially fashionable charge that literature is dead, but specifies that this is literature that is practiced for its own sake. He then calls for a literature of documentaries and social reportage that would educate the politically illiterate.

Enzensberger explores similar and new issues in *Politische Brosamen* (*Political Crumbs*, 1982), a recent collection of essays, published in translation in 1990, which can be seen as a companion volume to *Mediocrity and Delusion*. *Political Crumbs* is especially notable for "Reluctant Eurocentrism," an essay comparing the Third World's emulation of European culture and products and Europe's own post-imperialist bad conscience and dissatisfied Eurocentrism. Another highlight of that collection is "The Highest Stage of Underdevelopment: A Hypothesis about Really Existing Socialism," in which Enzensberger points out how the nomenklatura of Second and Third World socialist countries destroyed "human desires, human imagina-

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tion, human productivity on a massive scale" by their systematic refusal to acknowledge the discrepancy between their utopian ideals and reality.

The essays in *Mediocrity and Delusion* were written between 1974 and 1989, before the destruction of the Berlin Wall. And yet, neither Enzensberger nor his translator bothered to update these works. Such strongly worded and topical criticism merits, at the very least, an acknowledgment of whether the arguments and accusations still obtain or whether they should be tempered in light of such unexpected and cataclysmic developments.

Despite some very real weaknesses, these essays do measure up to the admirable critical ideal Enzensberger set himself in 1962: "It has no intention of subjugation or aggression. Criticism as I attempt it does not seek to make short shrift of its objects nor to liquidate them but to subject them to a second look: revision and not revolution is its objective." In this book he proposes as a model the social critic, who, with "stoic disbelief and the greatest attentiveness," follows "the method of the yachtsman who tacks with the wind as well as against it." Such stoic disbelief has afforded Enzensberger little opportunity to sail with the prevailing winds, but has certainly not impeded his progress.

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ROBERT PHILLIPS

. . . And Then Do Something Else

LEARN WHAT YOU CAN DO WELL, Jean Cocteau instructed us, and then do something else. This might well be the personal credo of Carl Djerassi. In his autobiography, Djerassi portrays an individual anxious not to repeat himself, always eager to move on.[1] The book's very title is indicative of his varied interests. He chronicles careers with CIBA, where he helped discover one of the first antihistamines; with Syntex, where he spearheaded the first successful synthesis of cortisone from diosgenin, and where he led the chemical group that accomplished the first synthesis of a steroid oral contraceptive—making him, in the eyes of the world, the Father of the Pill; and with Wayne State University and Stanford University, where he taught world-class chemists. He has switched from the study of steroids to superconductors, then to drugs of abuse, and then on to cacti and insects. In his latest incarnation he is a novelist, author of *Cantor's Dilemma*. It is enough to make the heads of us mere mortals swim.

Of all his accomplishments, none ranks higher than his work in birth control. Djerassi agrees, stating that "birth control affects nearly everybody: people have used it, will use it, or use it, or are, at the very least, against it." His book shows him to be sensitive to the sociopolitical and cultural issues associated with birth control. At the same time, it also shows the possible dangers of rushing to market with a product without adequate sampling of preclinical tests. In the case of The Pill, according to Djerassi, "the FDA required preclinical studies with two hundred women volunteers prior to marketing approval." As a result, in the early 1960s the initial dosage marketed widely was 10 milligrams daily. This resulted in an increased risk by sixfold of fatal blood clots. (In heavy smokers, notably in pill users beyond the age of thirty-five, the risks were much higher.) A number of fatalities were attributed to this high dosage of the progestational steroid. It later was reduced to 1.0 milligrams daily. Djerassi states in retrospect that "the absolute number of deaths was still smaller than would occur in childbirth." This sounds like rationalization, and his book would appear to be testimony to the fact that the ultimate safety of many new drugs is rarely determined with certainty before they are marketed after only a small sampling. About the pill and its effects, Djerassi has

[1] THE PILL, PYGMY CHIMPS, AND DEGAS' HORSE, by *Carl Djerassi*. Basic Books. $25.00.

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no regrets. He sees it as having "contributed to the sexual revolution of our time and perhaps expedited it, because most of those changes in sexual mores would have happened anyway."

Part of the point of his autobiography is that there rarely is anything pure about science. He feels any scientist's life is subject to serendipity and a version of Jung's synchronicity. (Elsewhere he appears to contradict himself, stating, ". . . predictability rather than serendipity is the essence of science, and especially chemistry.") Djerassi describes his transition from a "hard" scientist to a "soft" one, one concerned with the more profound social ramifications of his research. Frequently the book reads like a thriller, especially when he is making an account of the competitive race against other research teams to be the first to synthesize cortisone. His timely synthesis placed Mexico on the map of steroid and scientific research. But as in all thrillers, the reader wants to know the outcome of events. Djerassi drops some threads, as in his account of smuggling icons out of the Soviet Union. Was he stopped? Was it easy? He never does tell us what happened to them or him after a Russian host pressed the icons upon him.

Unfortunately this is not an isolated episode. The book lacks a certain continuity. One chapter begins, "For a time after a cancer operation, the patient is allowed morphine," while the preceding chapter closed on a celebratory note over scientific discovery. Another section begins, "Not all my courses were devoid of examinations . . ." He never said they were. Djerassi mentions the suicide of his first child on page 13, but does not discuss it until much later—pages 284 and following. There is scant mention of the knee injury which kept him out of the military, or his later cancer surgery. We learn little about his first wife and their childless six-year marriage, or his affair with the woman who became pregnant with his first child and became his second wife. He does nothing to explore why, until his middle thirties, all the women close to him were a lot older than he, or why all three of his wives were Gentiles. Perhaps the man of science is incapable of analyzing human relationships. At one point he calls himself "a Stalin of the emotions." Yet of his dealings with colleagues in the laboratory he describes himself as, of necessity, "a benevolent dictator." He appears to be a gentle person. He has never permitted the killing of deer or coyote on his 1200-acre ranch, nor has he himself ever owned a gun or hunted. He also demonstrates an abundant sense of humor. When he applies his knowledge to insect birth control, he imagines laymen asking, "But doctor, how do you get a cockroach to take The Pill?" His book also has two chapters—bagatelles—which are self-deprecatory. One describes his brief career as a naive film tycoon: "We may not have known much about the movie business, but we had learned how to synthesize cortisone and the first steroid oral contraceptive; surely movie production would be a snap." He found out quite the contrary. Another chapter, "Inter-

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lude: Peacockery," concerns his foray into sartorial splendor. Elsewhere Djerassi manages to see the humor beneath his strange life. One travel voucher accounts for a $20 tip to twenty pygmies for lifting his jeep out of a swamp!

The autobiography does contain some rather dated concepts, as when Djerassi mentions "the present student generation's preoccupations with material goods and professional advancement." He does not seem to realize that the Yuppie Generation died on Black Monday—October 19, 1987. Elsewhere he is guilty of trite language, as when Cyrus Eaton is described as "hale and hearty." Any instructor of Freshman Composition would blue pencil that. Yet throughout the autobiography, Djerassi's genuine literary affinities are evident. At one point he quotes from *The Paris Review* interview with Cynthia Ozick. Elsewhere he cites a poem by Bruce Bawer, lines from George Bernard Shaw, and is depicted as reading on an airplane an anthology of haiku. So why did he remain a scientist so long? "Excitement, curiosity, and ambition," he replies. His first successful short story appeared in *The Hudson Review* in 1986.[2] Today he writes not science fiction, but what he calls "science-in-fiction." It is yet another intellectual career, this one begun in his sixties. And he and his third wife, poet and biographer Diane Middlebrook, have aided many other artists through the establishment of the Djerassi Foundation, which made of his ranch a West Coast version of Yaddo or the MacDowell Colony. He states, "I began to realize that free creative time without conditions may be the ultimate gift for an artist . . ."

Throughout *The Pill, Pygmy Chimps, and Degas' Horse* the author follows Einstein's dictum, "We should make things as simple as possible, but not simpler." Djerassi's chapter on the chemistry leading to the birth of the pill, for instance, is lucid—even if it does contain such words as "Ethynyltestosterone" and "Perhydrocyclopentanophenanthrene." Perhaps more scientists and autobiographers should have some of Djerassi's literary ambitions.

[2] "Castor's Dilemma," *The Hudson Review*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 3, Autumn 1986.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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JAYANTA MAHAPATRA's most recent collection of poetry is *A Whiteness of Bone*, published by Viking Penguin. . . . CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY's fifth book of poems, *Blue Autumn*, was published by Copper Beach Press of Brown University. . . . A.F. MORITZ's new book, *Song of Fear*, is from Brick Books (London, Ontario, 1992). . . . LANCE LARSEN* is a Ph.D. candidate in literature and creative writing at the University of Houston. . . . RICHARD HORNBY recently played the role of the Duke of York in the Los Angeles Shakespeare company production of *Richard II*. . . . JOHN LOUGHERY's anthology *First Sightings: Stories of American Youth* will be published in the spring by Persea Books. . . . ALAN DAVIS,* a founding editor of *American Fiction*, won the Minnesota Voices Award for *Rumors from the Lost World*, New Rivers Press. . . . DAVID MASON's *The Buried Houses* was co-winner of the 1991 Nicholas Roerich Poetry Prize. . . . DENNIS SAMPSON's second book, *Forgiveness*, is available from Milkweed Editions. . . . FELIX STEFANILE has recently reorganized his poetry magazine, *Sparrow*, as a publication devoted entirely to the contemporary sonnet. . . . MARK JARMAN's most recent book is *Iris*, a narrative poem the first section of which was published in the Summer 1991 issue of *The Hudson Review*. . . . TESS LEWIS* is a translator and reviewer living in New York City. She recently translated Peter Handke's *Once Again for Thucydides* for George Braziller. . . . ROBERT PHILLIPS' most recent books are a collection of short stories, *Public Landing Revisited* (Story Line Press), and a chapbook of poems, *Face to Face* (Wings Press).

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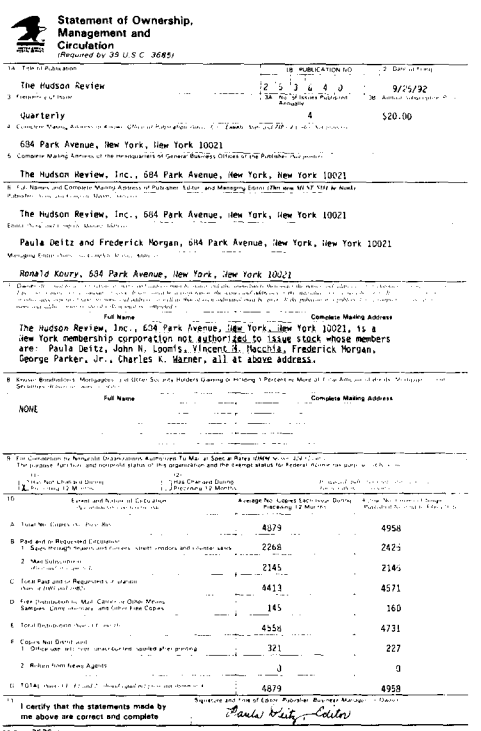

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Into the traditional ambience of awe, reverence, or at least of decent respect—with its correlative abhorrence of grave robbers and all such disturbers of the peace of the dead—the archeologist intrudes as the ultimate defiler, a systematic and professionally blasphemous predator—or worse, as a parasite, a scavenger, a ghoul—one who makes his living off the dead, heartlessly picking over those sacred relics for his own profane and alien purposes.

—Carl Pfluger, "Digging up the Dead: Consecration, Desecration, and Some Questions about Archeology," p. 541.

Anyone who has done any "exotic" traveling at all in the past few decades knows that a direct, honest, unironic foreign experience is hardly possible any more. Once the profit opportunities of mass tourism became apparent (something that happened in most places in the years after World War II), it was only a matter of time before the touts, the unscrupulous taxi drivers, the tourism ministers, and the creators of bogus "folklore shows," "typical restaurants," and "local arts and crafts" moved in, turning previously genuine places into Disneyland versions of themselves.

And yet, and yet. The real life of a place, I maintain, often has a vitality that can stand up to even these depradations.

—Gary Krist, "Ironic Journeys: Travel Writing in the Age of Tourism," p. 593.

Tenderness for Nabokov designates a kind of transparency of the self that allows it to be permeated by others. It allows us access to what Nabokov likes to call pure time, time freed of its confining metaphors of measurement, sequence, and process. Kindness is made possible too by surrender of exclusive selfhood, and acceptance of our mortal kinship and kindredness. And beyond that lies ecstasy, or "aesthetic bliss," which for Nabokov is as close as we can come to understanding the creation itself.

—Dean Flower, "Nabokov and Nastiness," p. 573.

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